

New Directions in Radicalisation and Violent Extremism: A Literature Review

Associate Professor Josh Roose,
Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh
Dr Vivian Gerrand



ADI
ALFRED DEAKIN INSTITUTE FOR
CITIZENSHIP AND GLOBALISATION



Core Research Team

Associate Professor Josh Roose, Deakin University (Lead)

Professor Shahram Akbarzadeh, Deakin University

Dr Vivian Gerrand, Deakin University

Contributing Research Team

Canada and United States of America

Professor Barbara Perry, UNESCO Chair in Hate Studies, Ontario Tech University

Professor John Horgan, Distinguished University Professor of Psychology, Georgia State University

Europe and United Kingdom

Professor Tahir Abbas, University of Leiden / International Centre of Counter Terrorism at the Hague

Dr Richard McNeil-Willson, University of Edinburgh

Australia

Dr Mohamed Ali, Deakin University

Professor Chad Whelan, Deakin University

Research Assistants

Dr Arif Saba, Deakin University

Dr Gerard Gill, Deakin University

Garon Mulyk, Ontario Tech University

Serena Raza, Deakin University

Joshua Lindsay, Deakin University

This report was written on the land of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nations. We pay respect to their elders past and present.

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Key Findings

The project aims to inform the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (Home Affairs) about new directions in radicalisation and violent extremism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The literature review has identified eight core areas that should be prioritised for further research:

- 1) Further inquiry is needed to better understand the underlying grievances shaping societal polarisation, the spread of disinformation, and attraction to anti-government and anti-democratic movements.
- 2) Greater exploration is required to understand the dynamics of offline radicalisation to violent extremism, including the role of friends, peers, and mentors in shaping ideological orientations, the passage of extremist narratives and recruitment, and effective policy intervention points.
- 3) Investigation of the intersecting roles of socio-economic influences and key demographic factors including expanding age ranges, gender, and geographic factors increasing vulnerability to extremist messaging is critical to building an evidence base to inform coordination between CVE and wider government policy interventions.
- 4) Empirical research is needed to understand new forms of political, religious, and ideologically motivated violent extremism, their commonalities and differences, and how this challenge might be addressed by both CVE policy makers and within the judicial system.
- 5) More comprehensive research is required to enhance the conceptualisation of radicalisation, de-radicalisation, and disengagement in custodial contexts, and to explore international best practice models for addressing radicalisation in prisons in a local context.
- 6) Research is required to identify best practice lessons for government that can be drawn upon from overseas to inform professional development and support for intervention workers and other practitioners to address frontline challenges. Similarly, research is required to identify best practice legislative approaches to addressing new forms of violent extremism.
- 7) The role of the internet and social media in radicalisation and efforts by governments to address extremism with alternative narratives is increasingly well understood. Less so is how communities and individuals, without government support, organically challenge extremist narratives online and offline and the efficacy of these efforts. Empirical research is required to explore this in greater depth.
- 8) Research often involves the repetition of key concepts without critical engagement. Greater theoretical depth and conceptual innovation is required to address the constantly evolving dimension of violent extremism, and to ensure that relevant and timely questions are being asked. Research demonstrating grounded theoretical depth and conceptual innovation should be prioritised.

Executive Summary

Introduction

[1] The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant implications for radicalisation and violent extremism in Australia and other Western liberal democratic nations. A rapidly developing body of academic and policy literature explores these developments, and it is important to take stock of this work to build an evidence base which can inform best practice policy responses.

[2] To this end, in 2023, Home Affairs adopted a two-phase evidence-sourcing approach to inform their policy response.

[3] In Phase 1, constituted by this report, Home Affairs worked with the Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terror (AVERT) Network, to release a competitive call for proposals titled ‘A comprehensive literature review to identify existing research and trends on radicalisation and violent extremism in Australia over the past three years.’

[4] The primary objective of this report is to identify relevant existing literature and gaps in research to inform the implementation of Phase 2 of the National Research Project, which will be the funding of projects exploring key knowledge gaps.

[5] The report will focus on academic and policy publications on radicalisation and violent extremism in Australia over the years January 2020 – June 2023.

[6] The report acknowledges research literature and trends prior and since this period, and engages with them where necessary, though they remain beyond the scope of the review.

[7] The report is structured to address a series of nine questions put forward by Home Affairs in the call for submissions. The primary emphasis is on the Australian context, though these are challenges faced by other liberal democratic nations, so scholarship from the United Kingdom, Europe, and North America is included.

[8] In response to the questions asked in this project, the literature review has identified the following research needs and future research directions:

The Impact of Polarisation on Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

Question One: *What is the current relationship, if any, between social/political polarisation and radicalisation/violent extremism and how has this changed over time?*

[9] While the Australian socio-political landscape featured polarisation prior to the pandemic in early 2020, levels of polarisation increased as public health driven lockdowns and vaccine mandates took effect. This led to various actors mobilising against these measures based on a wide array of grievances.

[10] Further research is needed to better grasp the underlying grievances shaping societal polarisation, the spread of disinformation and in particular, attraction to anti-government movements.

[11] More work is also required to explore new ideological developments including the fusing of conspiratorial narratives and other belief systems, and how these contribute to radicalisation and violent extremism.

Main Drivers to Violent Extremism

Question Two: *Have there been any changes over the last three years (since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic) in relation to the main drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism, including specifically among young people? If so, what are they?*

[12] The COVID-19 pandemic and related public health measures, in particular ‘lockdowns’, resulted in increased time spent online. During the period 2020-2023, online drivers appear to have played an important role in exposure to violent extremist narratives. Key literature suggests that increased engagement with social media, in combination with other factors, has played an important role in the radicalisation of youth.

[13] Research indicates that inequalities and a sense of relative deprivation and injustice were key drivers in the attraction to conspiracy theories and violent extremist narratives. The pandemic and resultant government approaches including lockdowns and vaccine mandates exacerbated this trend, though this was not a new development in and of itself.

[14] The spread of extremist narratives by social media influencers is a relatively recent phenomenon that appears to have occurred as young people spent more time online during the pandemic. These influencers may have extended the reach of extreme ideas beyond those experiencing relative deprivation and inequality, normalising extreme ideas. This is an area requiring further research.

[15] Some research, particularly in the United States, demonstrates that individuals drawn to anti-government extremism over the course of the period 2020-2023 are often older on average. More research is required to explore the take up of extremist ideas by older demographics in Australia and how these intersect with other demographic factors. There exists little empirically grounded evidence into why this is occurring, and importantly, how this might be countered.

Impact of Government Rhetoric on Violent Extremism

Question Three: *What is the impact of government rhetoric on community sentiment and engagement with government on violent extremism risks and threats?*

[16] It is important to differentiate between official government policy pronouncements and the comments of individual politicians. The former speaks to trust in government and the creation of space for disinformation where this is lacking, while the latter refers to the impact of populist ‘off-script’ declarations by politicians speaking to their perceived constituents - and the potential impact for this to feed grievances.

[17] Divisive messaging that stigmatises minorities damages community trust and willingness to cooperate with government counter-extremism efforts.

[18] Most of the literature explores the damage of divisive rhetoric prior to the pandemic. Literature suggests that governments at both the Federal and State level employed positive and constructive messaging to good effect throughout the pandemic. Positive and inclusive communication improves receptiveness of prevention initiatives.

[19] Little research exists about how criticism of anti-lockdown and ‘freedom movement’ protests impacted participants. It might be hypothesised that this contributed to their further marginalisation.

[20] These findings highlight the need for careful communication from political leaders to constructively shape societal attitudes and build civic partnerships around addressing extremism threats.

Best Practice Approaches to the Delivery of P/CVE Programs

Question Four: *What are best practice approaches among likeminded countries to delivering P/CVE programs alongside social policy and law enforcement responses?*

[21] Australia and likeminded countries, particularly Five Eyes Partners, embrace an evidence-based approach to CVE. Across these nations there has been a focus on engaging communities as partners in P/CVE programs and a willingness to embrace community resilience models and a needs-based approach to intervention programming.

[22] Governments in likeminded countries have commissioned monitoring and evaluation of research to assess program effectiveness and the impacts of counter-extremism measures. There is a recognition among these countries that more monitoring and evaluation is necessary for continuous improvement.

[23] Research indicates that community and family-based supports have also informed prevention and intervention across social policy and law enforcement responses for disengagement from violent extremism in likeminded countries.

[24] More research is required to understand what other nations are doing to inform their practice in professional development and support for intervention workers to address frontline challenges.

Societal Fault Lines Driving Unrest and Violence

Question Five: *What are the key and emerging societal fault lines currently driving domestic unrest and communal violence?*

[25] The pandemic has had the impact of deepening pre-existing societal fault lines. Increasing inequalities are compounding socio-economic fault lines, with gaps emerging between wealthier and more established inner suburbs and outer suburban and rural localities. Gaps between older and younger Australians and migrant Australians are also key challenges. Sovereign Citizen movements are an example of one group that benefits from these fault lines, articulating anti-government grievances in building a movement with a history of violent extremism overseas and violent extremist potential in Australia.

[26] A gender-based fault line is emerging globally. In the context of social change, some men are experiencing stagnating or downward social trajectories, contributing to an anti-feminist and anti-women backlash from some. This backlash is exploited by extremist movements who seek to reinvigorate traditional gender and sexuality hierarchies.

[27] Despite the increasing intersection of societal fault lines, their impact and their exploitation by movements with strong violent extremist rhetoric and potential, little research in the field of academic CVE literature

adequately explores these intersections. More work is required to understand how socio-economic developments are contributing to the emergence of violent extremism in Australia.

Motivational Bases of Radicalisation to Violence

Question Six: How do the motivational bases of radicalisation to violence (e.g. religious, grievance-based, political, etc.) influence their pathways to violence?

[28] Traditional ‘thick’, holistic political, religious, and ideological beliefs with a comprehensive worldview contributing to radicalisation to violence remained an important component of the threat landscape. Extreme right and Islamist movements remain influential in shaping attraction to and enactment of violent extremist acts.

[29] Other social movements with ‘thin’, grievance-fuelled ideologies have evolved dramatically, including Sovereign Citizen, Incel, and conspiratorial movements. A research gap exists in how we understand the potential pathways to violence in the Australian context of these movements.

[30] Other, new forms of ‘composite’, ‘salad bar’, or ‘ideologically promiscuous’ movements have emerged in the context of the pandemic as individuals spent more time online. Individuals and groups select elements of ideologies and conspiracy theories to suit their personal grievances. More research is required to understand this decision-making process and how these movements manifest in new forms of violence.

[31] Ideological convergences between these groups are also important. Antiwomen, antisemitic and anti LGBTIQ+ attitudes exist as ideological commonalities across extreme right, Salafi Jihadist, conspiratorial and Incel movements, uniting potential targets for violence. More work is required to unpack how this may shape pathways to violence and ideological cross-pollination.

Radicalisation in Prisons

Question Seven: To what extent do violent extremists radicalise in prison and what are the drivers of this radicalisation?

[32] Some research suggests that the climate and characteristics, as well as the moral code of inmates can facilitate or neutralise radicalisation, as individuals must adapt their beliefs and behaviours to seek protection, belonging, and membership within existing inmate subgroups.

[33] Those who are most vulnerable, for example inmates in maximum security facilities or those who do not have external supports, are more likely to (rapidly) assimilate to prison culture and seek acceptance from prison subgroups. This introduces the possibility that some inmates may fall victim to the influence of violent extremist groups and ideologies that offer both material and moral support to offset the uncertainty and harsh conditions that characterise the prison experience.

[34] Research by a small cluster of Australian researchers, often with small samples, has identified that there is considerable variability in factors driving inmates to radicalise. This is similarly the case in assessing the efficacy on disengagement interventions, where the opportunity for self-reflection was considered to play a role.

[35] While there is some agreement in international literature that prisons can be fertile environments for the radicalisation of non-extremist inmates or the further indoctrination of those serving terror related sentences, unpacking the extent of this phenomena is challenging. Key to this is the placement of radicalised inmates within prisons, staff training, and the use of risk assessments tools when formulating and managing risk.

[36] Most research has focused on Muslim or extreme right prisoners. There is no available literature exploring how more recent forms of ideological orientations interact with the justice system and how to deal with these. In a similar vein, more research is required to enhance the conceptualisation of radicalisation, de-radicalisation, and disengagement in custodial contexts.

Pre-Attack Online Behaviour by Terrorists

Question Eight: *To what extent can we observe trends in the online behaviour of terrorists in Western countries prior to conducting their attacks?*

[37] A significant body of research (much non-specific to the pandemic era) demonstrates that terrorists not only spent significant time online, consuming and sharing extreme content, but also posted statements about their general views, grievances, ideological leanings, and even intent to commit acts of targeted violence. These are often expressed via “manifestos”, which range in size, quality, and originality.

[38] In addition to leaving real-world indicators of intent, attackers often leak elaborate public statements of intent, justification, and possible inspiration for others to emulate in advance of their acts. This is often referred to as ‘leakage’.

[39] Whilst empirical research exists that analyses how online interactions and exposure to extremist content affects, or facilitates, individual violent extremist behaviour, it is not understood how this works in group contexts, particularly in the context of anti-government extremism.

[40] More research is required to understand the differences between online and offline radicalisation to violent extremism and the role of the internet in planning and conducting attacks.

[41] Research, in cooperation with policing and security agencies, is required to explore the processes at play between detection of online manifestos and the mobilisation of police to detect and react to the threat.

Emerging Trends in the Propagation of Extremist Ideology

Question Nine: *What are the emerging trends over the last three years in how violent extremists in Australia are sharing their views or propaganda?*

[42] Research about how violent extremists in Australia have shared their views and propaganda in the years 2020-2023 is still emerging. That which does exist indicates that existing trends of online organisation and recruitment have not only continued but accelerated.

[43] Social media and encrypted messaging apps have played a key role in facilitating the spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories, with little to no regulation by government actors.

[44] Violent extremist groups are adept at utilising emotion and increasingly, conceptions of masculinity and an array of both ideological and grievance fuelled narratives to reach their target cohort for recruitment.

[45] There is an increasing body of literature on the methods through which violent extremist groups share their views and propaganda online, though comparatively very little on face to face sharing of messages and recruitment across vulnerable populations, including those impacted socio-economically by the pandemic in rural and regional Australia.

Limitations in the Literature from the Review

[46] Research is required to understand the intersection of socio-economic challenges, specificities of culture, unjust treatment, grievance and vulnerability to disinformation, conspiratorial material, polarisation and extremism.

[47] More work is required to understand how to build trust and alternative narratives by governments in the face of a relatively new form of highly animated anti-government extremism.

[48] Research is required to identify best practice lessons for government that can be drawn upon from overseas to inform professional development and support for intervention workers and other practitioners to address frontline challenges.

[49] More research is required to understand the potential of new forms of ‘composite’ or ‘fused’ political, religious and ideologically motivated violent extremism resulting from primarily online environments and how they might be addressed by policy makers, practitioners and within the judicial system.

[50] In particular, research is required to understand this decision-making process of individuals as they choose from an online assortment of extremist ideologies and grievance fuelled narratives and how these contribute to new forms of violence.

[51] Research is required to enhance the conceptualisation of radicalisation, de-radicalisation, and disengagement in custodial contexts to contribute to consistency in application and practice.

[52] There is limited understanding of how groups form and function in online and offline contexts and mediate content amongst one another, particularly in the context of anti-government extremism.

[53] More research is required to understand the differences between online and offline radicalisation to violent extremism and the role of the internet in planning and conducting attacks.

[54] Research, in cooperation with policing and security agencies, is required to explore the processes at play between detection of online manifestos and the mobilisation of police to detect and react to the threat.

[55] The focus on online recruitment has seen research overlook the role of face to face sharing of extremist messaging and recruitment. Research is required to better understand this important dimension.

Key Findings: Areas for Future Research

[56] The literature review has identified eight interrelated core areas that should be prioritised for further research. These are outlined as follows:

- 1) Further inquiry is needed to better understand the underlying grievances shaping societal polarisation, the spread of disinformation, and attraction to anti-government and anti-democratic movements.
- 2) Greater exploration is required to understand the dynamics of offline radicalisation to violent extremism, including the role of friends, peers, and mentors in shaping ideological orientations, the passage of extremist narratives and recruitment, and effective policy intervention points.
- 3) Interdisciplinary investigation of the intersecting roles of socio-economic influences and key demographic factors including expanding age ranges, gender, and geographic factors increasing vulnerability to extremist messaging is critical to building an evidence base to inform coordination between CVE and wider government policy interventions.
- 4) Empirical research is needed to understand new forms of political, religious, and ideologically motivated violent extremism, their commonalities and differences, and how this challenge might be addressed by both CVE policy makers and within the judicial system.
- 5) More comprehensive research is required to enhance the conceptualisation of radicalisation, de-radicalisation, and disengagement in custodial contexts, and to explore international best practice models for addressing radicalisation in prisons in a local context.
- 6) Research is required to identify best practice lessons for government that can be drawn upon from overseas to inform professional development and support for intervention workers and other practitioners to address frontline challenges including rapid identification of imminent threats. Similarly, research is required to identify best practice legislative approaches to addressing new forms of violent extremism.
- 7) The role of the internet and social media in radicalisation and efforts by governments to address extremism with alternative narratives is increasingly well understood. Less so is how communities and individuals, without government support, organically challenge extremist narratives online and offline and the efficacy of these efforts. Empirical research is required to explore this in greater depth.
- 8) Research often involves the repetition of key concepts without critical engagement. Greater theoretical depth and conceptual innovation is required to address the constantly evolving dimension of violent extremism, and to ensure that relevant and timely questions are being asked. Research demonstrating theoretical depth and conceptual innovation should be prioritised.

Introduction

Aims and Objectives of the Report

[1] This project aims to inform the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs (Home Affairs) about new directions in radicalisation and violent extremism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[2] The project objective is to identify relevant existing studies and gaps in research to inform the implementation of Phase 2 of the National Research Project, which involves the funding of projects exploring key knowledge gaps.

[3] The report draws upon a systematic literature review combined with expert insights to provide an evidence base to inform decision-making.

[4] The review draws upon literature produced between January 2020 and June 2023. The report acknowledges research literature and trends prior to and since this period and engages with them where necessary, though they remain beyond the scope of the review. The period July 2023-2024 is considered in the concluding section of the report.

[5] The report is structured to address nine questions relating to current developments in countering violent extremism put forward by Home Affairs. These are:

- 1) What is the current relationship, if any, between social/political polarisation and radicalisation/violent extremism and how has this changed over time?
- 2) Have there been any changes over the last three years (since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic) in relation to the main drivers of radicalisation and violent extremism, including specifically among young people? If so, what are they?
- 3) What is the impact of government rhetoric on community sentiment and engagement with government on violent extremism risks and threats?
- 4) What are best practice approaches among likeminded countries to delivering P/CVE programs alongside social policy and law enforcement responses?
- 5) What are the key and emerging societal fault lines currently driving domestic unrest and communal violence?
- 6) How do the motivational bases of radicalisation to violence (e.g. religious, grievance-based, political, etc.) influence their pathways to violence?
- 7) To what extent do violent extremists radicalise in prison and what are the drivers of this radicalisation?
- 8) To what extent can we observe trends in the online behaviour of terrorists in Western countries prior to conducting their attacks?

- 9) What are the emerging trends over the last three years in how violent extremists in Australia are sharing their views or propaganda?

[6] Cumulatively, these questions provide important insights into the key contemporary challenges facing policy makers and scholars alike, as they grapple with a new and rapidly developing threat landscape.

Contribution of the Report

[7] The Australian Government Department of Home Affairs coordinate an integrated approach to Australia's national security, including extremism and terrorism, as well as social cohesion and multicultural affairs, both of which face significant challenges in the contemporary post pandemic era.

[8] In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, Australia, like other Western nations, has experienced rapid development and evolution in the form and composition of extremist movements.

[9] It is increasingly challenging to make sense of these new movements and trends, many of whom not only emerged within the COVID-19 pandemic context but are flourishing in an aftermath of the COVID-19 peak defined by rapidly increasing socio-economic inequalities, an unregulated flow of misinformation and disinformation online, the internationalisation of extremist narratives, and the apparently paradoxical nature of their evolution and actions.

[10] Deepening this challenge is the interdisciplinary nature of much of the literature, with analogous fields from psychology, criminology, and behavioural studies to sociology, communications, and political science publishing empirically based research, many on an aspect of the same problem. Resultingly much is 'known', though far less is 'understood', as there has been insufficient attempt to draw on this wider body of literature in a consistent manner.

[11] The aim of this report is to identify trends in radicalisation and violent extremism in Australia over the past three years, focusing on the proliferation and impact of extremist ideologies between January 2020 and June 2023.

[12] This review will identify relevant existing research and gaps in research to inform the implementation of Phase 2 of the National Research Project, the funding of projects exploring key gaps in knowledge. To achieve this goal, this project has adopted a multi-layered approach to the collection of literature.

Methodology

Introduction

[13] The task of this report is one of significant complexity, as the research process can take considerable time and it is likely that many studies drawing upon evidence gathered during this period may not yet be published.

[14] Furthermore, beyond academic literature published in peer-reviewed journals, there is a rich array of grey and policy literature on violent extremism and terrorism published in Australia and internationally. Often based upon research as it unfolds, it is important to consider this potential evidence base, albeit weighted to reflect its lack of rigorous scrutiny.

[15] It is also important to identify those published works that could conceivably be missed in a literature review defined by strict search terms and using private subscription funded academic databases.

[16] For this reason, several interrelated strategies or 'layers' of review were adopted to ensure not only rigour, but breadth and the substantive quality of articles drawn upon. These were:

- 1) A traditional systematic literature review of peer reviewed articles in six leading academic databases.
- 2) A hand search of grey and policy literature on violent extremism and policies and programs focused on countering violent extremism (CVE) in Australia and internationally during and post COVID-19. This utilised Google Scholar and searches of specific government websites and included publications produced by intergovernmental, governmental, and non-governmental bodies, research centres and thinktanks working on CVE issues.
- 3) A hand search of articles by project team members as leading experts in their areas, including engagement with new and emerging literature on the topic across disciplinary boundaries.

The methods for these are explored below.

The Literature Review Process

[17] Systematic reviews are an important tool for policy makers and practitioners alike, synthesising the current knowledge in a field of study to identify future research priorities, and generating or assessing theories. They assist in making sense of large bodies of information to find what works, how it works and what interventions might do harm.¹ To ensure their value, authors must provide a transparent, complete, and accurate account of the review's purpose, methodology, and findings.² This review builds upon the seven-stage process outlined by Petticrew and Roberts and Gough et al.,³ outlined below.

[18] Step One: Define the research questions. In this report these were defined Home Affairs based on identified challenges and requirements based on practice.

[19] Step Two: Develop an advisory group. The wide expertise of the project team was chosen to enable a breadth of international academic expertise across academic disciplines, encompassing political science, sociology, psychology, criminology and studies of radicalisation.

[20] Step Three: Write a protocol. The project team designed a protocol for the systematic search of six academic databases including keywords and search inclusion and exclusion criteria. These are explored sequentially below at paragraph [25].

[21] Step Four: Carry out the literature search. The search was carried out by a team of research assistants under the supervision of the project team.

[22] Step Five: Screen the References. A thorough review was undertaken to identify those sources that were relevant to the project and to discard those that were not. This process is explored below at paragraphs [34] to [39].

[23] Step Six: Synthesis of data to address research questions. The data was available to all members of the project team (through a Zotero database) who reviewed it and its applicability to addressing the research questions as they drafted responses.

[24] Step Seven: Dissemination of the review. This review is disseminated through the delivery of the report to Home Affairs. See Tables 1-3 and Figure 1 (**Appendices 1-4**) for more information on keywords and identified sources of literature.

Protocol for the Systematic Review

[25] As identified above at paragraph [20], keywords and search inclusion and exclusion criteria were required for the systematic review.

[26] The search strategy for peer-reviewed articles in academic databases was based on an agreed set of keywords developed by the project team who are leading experts on the subject. The keywords were piloted in various combinations with the aim to identify the most relevant peer-reviewed literature to both established and emerging forms of radicalisation and violent extremism in Australia and internationally during the period January 2020 to June 2023.

[27] To be included in the database created for this review, the source had to contain at least one of the CVE keywords, one of the COVID-related keywords, and one of the research question keywords either in the article's title, abstract, or keywords. This is to ensure that the literature is referring to relevant violent extremism and CVE literature and policies and programs during the last three years. The final search terms and string used for this review is shown in Table 1 (**Appendix 1**).

[28] We used the final search string to search for relevant peer-reviewed literature in the following six academic databases:

- Taylor and Francis (Online Journals)
- Academic Search Complete
- Political Science Complete
- Sage (Journals Online)
- Web of Science

- Scopus

[29] These databases were considered the most appropriate for this review, as they are amongst the world's leading scholarly databases, are multidisciplinary, and have a strong presence in both humanities and social sciences.

Systematic Review of Database Articles

[30] It was important to set up a preliminary inclusion and exclusion criteria from the outset.⁴ The review included both Australian and international academic literature with an emphasis on Western contexts that share similar challenges and directly influence developments in Australia, primarily in Europe, the UK, and North America.

[31] As demonstrated in Table 2 (**Appendix 2**), searches were limited to peer reviewed English language sources in the social sciences, arts and humanities, psychology and health sciences disciplines. between January 2020 and June 2023.

Grey and Policy Literature Search

[32] To complement the database search, the project team searched for grey and policy literature including publications produced by intergovernmental, governmental, and non-governmental bodies working on CVE issues. In addition to using Google Scholar to gather these documents, the team also consulted leading national and international organisations and thinktanks working on CVE issues to collect reports and policy documents relevant for this review. These are identified at Table 3 (**Appendix 3**).

Expert Hand Search

[33] To ensure that relevant literature had not been missed beyond the systematic review and grey and policy literature search, the academics engaged in the research project conducted individual hand searches based on their expert knowledge of the field, including, but not limited to new journals not yet indexed by key databases. These sources were subsequently drawn upon to provide an added layer of depth to the analysis and engagement with questions posed.

Screening References for the Systematic Review

[34] After conducting the search, the bibliographic details of all search results from the six electronic search databases were imported into the reference management software Zotero and merged into a single global database. The electronic search across the six databases yielded a total of 30,834 results.

[35] In Zotero, all duplicates were automatically identified and removed (n= 4,646). The remaining articles after deduplication (n= 26,495) passed to the next stage of screening. In this stage, the articles were divided up among two reviewers and screened based on title and abstract against the eligibility criteria presented in Table 1 and Table 2. The titles and abstracts of all studies were screened manually. Studies were marked for exclusion if their titles and abstracts did not meet the inclusion criteria. The two reviewers collectively marked 25,448 sources for exclusion.

[36] To ensure reliability and credibility of the inclusion/exclusion process, this record was further screened by two project team researchers. As experts on the topic, the two researchers collectively identified 111 sources that

should be retained for inclusion. During this initial screening stage, a total of 25,448 articles were excluded and 1,074 articles were retained for the next stage of screening.

[37] In the second stage of screening, full-text screening of all eligible publications (n=1074) was conducted by individual experts. In line with the project design, individual experts focused on primary questions within their area of expertise and/or geography.

[38] Utilising the in-app search option in Zotero and using the question-specific keywords, individual experts identified all sources relevant to their research question(s) for this review. Once they identified the relevant sources, they screened the full text of the publication with the goal of identifying and extracting information relevant to their research question(s), and how it helps address the research question. During this process, a further 737 articles were excluded on full-text screening.

[39] The process by which the project team arrived at the final sample of records, and the number of records at each stage, are shown in Figure 1 (**Appendix 4**). The final number of sources included in this review is n=337 articles, which include 248 peer-reviewed publications and 89 grey literature sources.

Limitations

[40] The project's limitations are primarily linked to the limitations inherent in the research process, namely that the developments in violent extremism that occurred in the defined period are likely to take time to become evident. Further, research will take time to catch up and analyse the impact of these developments.

The Impact of Polarisation on Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

Introduction

[41] Social and political polarisation is to some extent, a component of liberal democratic society. However, extreme polarisation is detrimental to both the liberal democratic system and wider society.

[42] Extreme polarisation may be understood as diminishing mutual understanding leading to a decline in common ground, resulting in a binary worldview divided into ‘us’ and ‘them,’ wherein parties inhabit different political realities.⁵ Citizens become increasingly distanced from and suspicious of, other political perspectives, failing to critically interrogate their own biases or the accuracy of information they are exposed to.⁶ The result is a breakdown in the political civility and rule of law upon which democracy rests.⁷

[43] A global trend in increased social and political polarisation existed prior to the pandemic. This was particularly prevalent in the United States,⁸ although other global events including the British vote to leave the European Union are also demonstrative.⁹

[44] Polarisation is arguably the key effect of populism as it is ‘integral to the logic of constructing populist subjects’, raising the stakes of political competition and intensifying conflict.¹⁰ Populist political figures have played a key role in accelerating this trend.¹¹ For example, researchers at the University of Chicago identified that confidence in the US scientific community prior to, and just after, the onset of the pandemic decreased under the Trump administration amongst Republicans and increased amongst Democrats in the same timeframe.¹²

[45] Research literature also suggests that polarisation was a feature of Australian politics prior to the pandemic. The so-called ‘culture wars’ have been a feature of late twentieth and early twenty-first century Australian politics.¹³ These highly polarising battles have been fought over terrain including interpretations of Australian history,¹⁴ the role of museums,¹⁵ Australia Day celebrations,¹⁶ renewable energy,¹⁷ funding for the arts¹⁸ and reconciliation with indigenous communities.¹⁹

Polarisation and Acceleration of Radicalisation and Violent Extremism in Australia Pre-Pandemic

[46] Some scholars identify the election of US President Donald Trump as accelerating polarisation, accompanied as it was by the ‘infusion of fringe motifs including the denigration of ethnic and religious groups; the support of political extremists; and the acceptance of conspiracy theories’.²⁰ It is argued that Trump’s election in 2016 ‘mainstreamed’ extreme right politics, a process that occurred up to and during the COVID-19 pandemic,²¹ however it is important not to overlook the impact of the terror perpetrated against Muslims in Christchurch New Zealand, by Australian man Brenton Tarrant, who had interacted with and praised extreme right actors in Australia prior to his attack.²²

[47] Notwithstanding significant challenges with the Islamic State movement in the period 2014-2016, as several hundred Australian-born Muslim men travelled to Iraq and Syria to join the Salafi Jihadist movement, the emergence of the extreme right who actively sought to spread their message in public space was a key development in Australian extremism.²³

[48] Some researchers characterised the organisation of the extreme right online as composed of subcultural networks or a ‘milieu’ of actors with varying levels of commitment.²⁴ Campion has noted the transnational

dimensions of these prior to the pandemic, as extreme right movements within the West evolve, interact and coalesce in a manner that transcends geographic boundaries.²⁵

[49] Scholarship on the extreme right in Australia has been focused on examining recruitment narratives²⁶ particularly in online space,²⁷ and strategies including offline recruitment,²⁸ something that slowed down dramatically in the context of the pandemic. A general academic consensus exists that the extreme right prior to the pandemic, based their recruitment narratives on grievances, emotion (primarily anger) and nostalgia and positioned themselves as defenders against a hostile ‘outgroup’.²⁹ Recruitment narratives often reference violent themes, though typically do not openly call for violence. This literature was based primarily on analysis of online activity by the extreme right. A much smaller proportion of research was undertaken offline, likely due to the difficulties researching such young men.

[50] Amidst the profound social, political, and economic effects of the pandemic in Australia, it is arguably easy to neglect the rapid increase in polarisation that was already occurring as a result of the Black Summer of 2019. A number of studies explored the increase in polarisation and misinformation on social media in this context,³⁰ whilst others explored the attempted exploitation of the disaster by extremists using disinformation.³¹ Concerningly, in their study of over 1.8 million tweets and over 119,000 active accounts on twitter (‘X’) accounts during the bushfires, Bailo et al. identified that extreme right accounts moved to a central location of influence in sharing information, a position ‘comparable to that of journalists’.³²

[51] Given these trends, it follows that the conditions created by the COVID-19 pandemic, including heightened emotion, competing bodies of information, and the risk of harm³³ would accelerate this trend.

Increases in Polarisation in Australia during the Pandemic

[52] Levels of trust in government and public officials play an important role in social polarisation and can also assist in pinpointing where it is taking hold. Studies indicate an initial boost in levels of trust in government policy responses during the early stages of the pandemic.³⁴ This was highest amongst women and the elderly.³⁵ A later study indicated that trust had started to erode by the second half of the pandemic from 2021.³⁶

[53] An emerging body of literature indicates a polarisation of political attitudes amongst those that did not trust the government or public health measures such as lockdowns³⁷ and vaccine mandates.³⁸ A significant array of international literature also explored this,³⁹ indicating that developments in Australia were part of a global pattern.

[54] Distrust in government was evident amongst some groups very early on during the lockdown period, particularly ‘anti-vaxxers’. It subsequently morphed into an online and real-world anti-government movement incorporating a wide variety of actors from anti-vaxxers,⁴⁰ religious conservatives,⁴¹ Sovereign Citizens,⁴² the extreme right⁴³ and fringe populist politicians.⁴⁴

[55] Polarisation also emerged in migrant communities. This extended to intracommunity disputes between Chinese migrant communities about loyalties to their homeland⁴⁵ and the representation of insiders and outsiders to the wider community.⁴⁶ Multicultural communities were blamed by some populist actors for spreading COVID-19,⁴⁷ resulting in both disinformation and social divisions about multiculturalism, increasing polarisation and undermining social cohesion.⁴⁸

[56] The spread of disinformation and misinformation throughout the pandemic played an important role, with studies exploring the role of the media and social media in spreading disinformation on a global scale.⁴⁹

[57] The research literature indicates significant consistencies between broad movements, including distrust of government and science, a conspiratorial framing of the pandemic, deep-seated grievances embedded in ‘relative deprivation’ and very often, the presence of opportunistic actors seeking to gain either politically or financially.⁵⁰

[58] As Australia emerged from the pandemic, it was generally accepted that it had been successful in limiting the loss of life.⁵¹ However, there remained a residual polarisation that continues to provide fertile terrain for violent extremist movements and actors.

The Impact of Polarisation on Violent Extremism during the COVID-19 Pandemic and Aftermath

[59] Polarisation resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to an increase in violent extremism on a global scale, though the extent of this is not clear. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, political developments including the January 06 insurrection at the US Capitol building in 2021, and other global developments including election cycles and foreign conflicts have also played a role.

[60] The pandemic presented both opportunities for extremists (such as social dislocation, disruption and fear and increased use of social media), but also challenges such as including a lack of ready access to targets and wider public attention amidst the all-encompassing dynamic of the pandemic and government responses.⁵²

[61] Violent extremists have responded by actively weaving individual grievances arising from the pandemic into their messaging, to mobilise and incite violence.⁵³ This typically takes the form of scapegoating, fusing conspiratorial tropes about the ‘other’ with contemporary developments.⁵⁴ This has arguably driven an increase in the convergence of grievance-based narratives discussed in chapter six at paragraph [178] below.

[62] Grossman asserted that COVID-19 had been weaponised through the promotion of conspiracy theories and disinformation, with this potentially having greater impact amongst young people.⁵⁵ Similarly, Davey, Simmons and Peucker considered the role of international events including January 06, suggesting that ‘moments of crisis’ are likely to be exploited by violent extremists.⁵⁶

[63] Extremist actors have also sought to capitalise on the global advent of misinformation and disinformation, leveraging legitimate public concern and the increased levels of distrust in government to disseminate their beliefs and ideology.⁵⁷ In response to this, Cave and Wallis call for closer collaboration with online platforms and civil society groups, as well as collaboration between like-minded states to address cyber-enabled threats on the transnational level.⁵⁸

Summary

[64] Polarisation was a feature of Australian politics prior to the pandemic in early 2020, but increased as public health driven lockdowns and vaccine mandates took effect. This led to the emergence of a broad array of actors mobilising against these and, on their basis, of a wide array of grievances.

[65] Further research is needed to better grasp underlying grievances shaping societal polarisation, the spread of disinformation, and attraction to anti-government movements.

[66] More work is also required to explore new developments in ideologies fusing conspiratorial narratives and other belief systems, and how these contribute to radicalisation and violent extremism.

Main Drivers to Violent Extremism

Introduction

[67] It is important to note from the outset that the concept of radicalisation has long been debated and critiqued.⁵⁹ Yet the term, when paired with the concept of ‘violent extremism’, offers a frame for understanding the progression of an individual’s belief system from non-violent to violent.

[68] Many theories and models of radicalisation exist.⁶⁰ Vergani, Iqbal, Ilbaha and Barton’s systematic scoping review of literature identified ‘push’, pull and ‘personal’ factors as contributors to radicalisation,⁶¹ a commonly used analytical frame in the Australian context⁶² that assists in addressing this question.

[69] Push factors are structural factors that drive individuals toward violent extremism. These may include unemployment and education, though also more tangible factors including experiences of injustice, inequality, marginalisation, grievance, social exclusion, frustration, victimisation, and stigmatisation.⁶³

[70] Pull factors include cognitive factors such as consumption of propaganda, the perceived morality of a group, social mechanisms and group processes including identity fusion and identification, group dynamics including peer pressure, the formation of strong bonds with resultant fulfilment and belonging, family and kinship ties, leadership, including the role of charismatic leadership, and material incentives.⁶⁴

[71] Personal factors include individual psychological vulnerabilities independent of push and pull factors (mental health conditions, depression, trauma), personality traits (narcissism, impulsivity) and specific individual characteristics (age, gender, nationality) that may contribute to make an individual more susceptible to extremism.⁶⁵

Changes to Young People, Radicalisation and Violent Extremism

[72] Australia has faced considerable challenges over the past two decades with the attraction of young people to violent extremism. This was evident in the attraction of young men to the extreme right in Australia leading up to the pandemic.⁶⁶

Push Factors

[73] The pandemic had an unexpected impact on socio-economic inequality. In a 2024 report reflecting on the trajectory of inequality in Australia over the course of the pandemic, the Productivity Commission noted that income inequality initially dropped as government support payments, including JobKeeper, increased. However, as the economy improved in the aftermath of the pandemic, income inequality rapidly increased, even as unemployment fell.⁶⁷

[74] There exists some conjecture about the extent to which socio-economic inequality drives radicalisation and violent extremism. Roose asserts that perceived social trajectory may be a more effective frame for understanding potential attraction based on perceptions of stunted upward mobility and status (and a resultant emotional reaction of anger, hatred, shame, humiliation and resentment).⁶⁸

[75] An important ‘meta-ethnographic synthesis’ (MES) of qualitative studies on the inequality-radicalisation relationship’ by Franc, Poli and Pavolvić examined studies between 2001 and 2017 and explored the extent of the relationship between inequality and radicalisation. This review identified that poverty, marginalisation, deprivation and perceived injustice at both the personal and societal level can contribute to radicalisation.⁶⁹

[76] Furthermore, perceived inequality, injustice and a sense of relative deprivation is more important than objective measures in triggering a path toward radicalisation.⁷⁰

[77] Extremist recruitment narratives both before and during the pandemic featured references to economic trajectories and inequalities.⁷¹ Conspiracy theories emphasising the relative deprivation of one group and perceived favouritism, or economic power of another group worked hand in hand with this push factor as a powerful pull factor.

[78] Public health responses to the pandemic including stay at home ‘lockdown’ orders and vaccine mandates may also have contributed as push factors for those who felt most marginalised, impacted and had a sense of perceived injustice.⁷² As in the case of economic inequality, these appear to have been woven into larger conspiratorial narratives, both in Australia and overseas.⁷³

Pull Factors

[79] The pandemic led to significant increases in online activity amongst populations, increasing the likelihood of extremist narratives being encountered. Davies, Wu and Frank found in the Canadian context that posting by extreme right and incels increased significantly during the pandemic, resulting in an online environment that constituted ‘a witch’s brew of grievances.’⁷⁴

[80] Increased reliance by young people on social media and the online sphere both for information seeking and socialisation during the pandemic meant a weakening of the protection of young people by families and guardians – leaving young people potentially more vulnerable to engagement with extremist groups, influencers and their narratives.⁷⁵

[81] A study conducted with 8,806 survey respondents over eight locations (Belgium, Canada, England, Philippines, Hong Kong, New Zealand, United States and Switzerland) during the pandemic found that greater exposure to traditional media (television, radio, newspapers) and health experts was associated with lower levels of conspiracy and misinformation beliefs, while exposure to politicians, digital media and personal contacts was associated with higher levels of conspiracy and misinformation beliefs. Depression was also a factor seen to be linked to higher conspiracy beliefs.⁷⁶

[82] In an engagement with scholarship, Ware refers to the present moment as the ‘third generation of online radicalisation’, in lone actors adopting anonymity on encrypted social media applications such as Telegram, coming to the fore as they ‘develop their own propaganda arm’ and prepare for violence.⁷⁷

[83] The phenomena of transnational social media influencers doubling as recruiters for extremist movements appears to have emerged in the context of the pandemic.⁷⁸ Influencers are typically charismatic actors and content creators with significant followings across one or more social media platforms. Due to their influence, they can encourage young people to engage with politics and shape political participation,⁷⁹ and were known to be active

across the extreme right,⁸⁰ including amongst women promoting ‘trad wife’ lifestyles (traditional female household roles).⁸¹ This extended widely to alt-health,⁸² anti-vax,⁸³ Salafi Jihadist⁸⁴ and violent misogynist⁸⁵ influencers.

[84] Beyond studies of some extreme right influencers and groups,⁸⁶ little research has been done in the Australian context exploring how these developments have shaped young Australians’ propensity to radicalisation and violent extremism.

[85] Extreme-right narratives concerning the pandemic have either acknowledged that it is real and blamed it on an out-group, either as spreaders or as their doing in a secret plot or claimed that the pandemic is a ruse or distraction to mask another conspiracy. Conspiracism serves to broaden the appeal of extreme right groups, who can position themselves as broadly anti-government rather than centrally racist or fascist. Extreme right and often explicitly fascist groups employ anti-government narratives that ironically claim that the government has used the COVID-19 pandemic to attack personal freedoms.⁸⁷

[86] An Australian example of this can be seen in the Telegram posts of Thomas Sewell, leader of the National Socialist Network. Sewell blends white supremacist Great Replacement theory with the ‘Great Reset’ conspiracy theory, which posits that pandemic lockdowns are a means for the global elite to impose a socialist world government.⁸⁸ The Great Reset is also, according to Sewell, going to destroy white culture and ‘make us and our children infertile, brown and gay.’ Sewell also claims that COVID is a biological weapon used by the Jews to make white people infertile.⁸⁹

Personal Factors

[87] Recent research has suggested that personal and familial factors may be particularly important in processes of radicalisation. Studies have suggested that close family attachments to mothers, fathers, siblings and other close family were related to resilience-building through social bonding, whilst weak attachments represented a potential risk factor towards radicalisation and violent extremism.⁹⁰

[88] Chin et al. found that adolescents faced considerable mental and physical health challenges due to the pandemic and were generally in poorer health than expected in non-crisis times.⁹¹ Such issues around mental and physical health have been directly linked to vulnerabilities and risk factors towards radicalisation, of which young people have been found to be particularly vulnerable.⁹²

[89] The pandemic had a significant impact on the social networks of young people, with young people demonstrating greater vulnerabilities in terms of loneliness as a result.⁹³ Greater social media engagement due to the pandemic has also been linked to higher levels of depression and mental health problems in young people, which can impact on the attraction to violent extremism.⁹⁴

[90] Torales et al. highlighted how the COVID-19 pandemic led to severe health problems amongst young people, including stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, insomnia, anger and fear.⁹⁵ Ultimately, this has led to movements such as extreme right groups preying upon the insecurities of young people as a result of changes caused by the pandemic, suggesting that more work is required to address youth inequality stemming from the past years.⁹⁶

[91] Cherney et al. found that a significant number of young people radicalised in Australia towards the Islamic State had a history of drug or alcohol abuse, as well as juvenile records for criminal activities, including assault, endangerment of others, robbery, drug offences, property damage or possession of an illegal weapon.⁹⁷ However,

some studies of radicalised youth have suggested that greater engagement in activities such as school, work or extracurricular activities may not reduce vulnerability towards radicalisation.⁹⁸

Older Generations and Violent Extremism: A New Frontier?

[92] Whilst concern has been raised since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns of the isolation and exposure of youth to potential processes of radicalisation, several acts of violence or potential violence have been linked to older males. Wells finds that five attacks have been carried out by extreme-right men in Europe over the age of 47 since June 2016, and that there has also been a significant increase in referrals of older individuals. The United Kingdom's Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation noted in 2022 that "the most recent completed extreme right-wing terrorist... attacks [had] all [been] carried out by older men".⁹⁹

[93] European "freedom movements" have tended towards an older demographic involvement, with protest convoys in Canada and the Netherlands, largely led and attended by farmers or small landowners, and Sovereign Citizen movements attracting an older demographic.¹⁰⁰ Meanwhile, organisations and movements that traditionally appeal to younger demographics have struggled to attract younger members – evident in studies of groups across the ideological spectrum, from Hizb ut-Tahrir to the Nordic Resistance Movement¹⁰¹.

[94] The University of Chicago project on Security and Threats¹⁰² has conducted nationally representative surveys on support for political violence in America. A study of extremist arrests from 2015-2020 found that 61% of cases were under the age of 34. The single largest groups were aged 25-34 (33%). However, in the case of the January 6th Insurrection and subsequent arrests, 67% of cases involved those over the age of 35, with the over half (54%) aged between 35 and 54. Interestingly, 13% were aged over 55.

[95] Compared to right-wing extremists in the years 2015-2020 (25%), just 9% of January 6th insurrectionists were unemployed, with 30% working in white collar industries including as Doctors, Attorneys and Architects, and 14% as business owners. The authors found that the vast majority had 'no connection to existing extreme right militias or groups' and that 'normal' pro-Trump activists joined with the extreme right to form a new kind of violent mass movement'.¹⁰³

[96] Social research company Roy Morgan¹⁰⁴ examined metadata harvested from smartphones of protesters at the 20 November 2021 Melbourne Freedom rally. Beyond identifying that protesters came overwhelmingly from the city's periphery, with some concentrations in Melbourne's Eastern and South-eastern suburbs, three groups in particular were present. The first were a demographic of on average older, white, wealthier-than-average conservatives, who make up about 15% of the wide population but constituted 23% of the protesters. The second were the 'leading lifestyle' group, constituting 31% of protesters who were prosperous and focused on success and their careers. In comparison to the 46% of protesters from prosperous backgrounds, just 14% of protesters were considered to come from marginalised backgrounds (compared to 5% in the wider community).

[97] There are certainly strong limitations to such studies, including a lack of transparency on the data used and pseudo academic labels not embedded in substantive theoretical frames. It is important to consider that there is a significant gap in knowledge about the apparently increased age profile of individuals attracted to violent extremism in Australia and the intersection of age with other demographic features including education, income, geographic location, and occupation. This is a gap in knowledge that should be addressed.

Summary

[98] The COVID-19 pandemic and related public health measures, in particular ‘lockdowns’, resulted in increased time online. Online drivers appear, based on the period 2020-2023, to have played an important role in exposure to violent extremist narratives. To this extent, key literature suggests that active engagement with online social media, in combination with other factors has played an increasingly important role in the radicalisation of youth.

[99] Research indicates that various inequalities and a sense of relative deprivation and injustice were key drivers in the attraction to conspiracy theories and violent extremist narratives. The pandemic and resultant government approaches including lockdowns and vaccine mandates exacerbated this trend, though this was not a new development in and of itself.

[100] The spread of extremist narratives by social media influencers is a relatively recent phenomenon that appears to have occurred as young people spent more time online during the pandemic. These influencers may have extended the reach of extreme ideas beyond those experiencing relative deprivation and inequality, normalising extreme ideas. This is an area requiring further research.

[101] Some research, particularly in the United States demonstrates that individuals drawn to anti-government extremism over the period 2020-2023 are often older on average. More research is required to explore the take up of extremist ideas by older demographics in Australia and how these intersect with other demographic factors. There exists little empirically grounded evidence into why this is occurring, and importantly, how this might be countered.

Impact of Government Rhetoric on Violent Extremism

Introduction

[102] The Australian government seeks to work with communities to ‘build resilience to all forms of violent extremism, whether politically, religiously or racially motivated’.¹⁰⁵ This relationship requires the development of positive messages to build trust with a diversity of communities.¹⁰⁶

[103] This section explores research on government communication, community engagement and the role of social media in radicalisation and government responses.

Government Communication on CVE

[104] Overly dramatic, hyperbolic government rhetoric can distort public understandings and threat perceptions related to extremism in an unhelpful manner. This increases public fears related to terrorism and decreases perceptions of the government’s effectiveness in protecting national security, undermining confidence in authorities’ abilities to manage risks.¹⁰⁷ Multiple studies, before the pandemic, show government statements influencing public threat perceptions,¹⁰⁸ with dramatic rhetoric cultivating fear and distorting understandings.¹⁰⁹ While inflated rhetoric damages security response and trust, accurate communication promotes vigilance without destructive alarmism.¹¹⁰

[105] Studies prior to the pandemic indicate that negative government rhetoric can be perceived as scapegoating communities. Cherney and Murphy conducted focus groups and surveys showing British Muslims’ perceptions of police and willingness to cooperate with counterterrorism investigations declined following statements by political leaders overtly linking Islam to terrorism and extremist ideologies.¹¹¹ They found such rhetoric cultivated Muslim fears of being profiled, undermining community-government relations.¹¹² Similarly, Patel established that political discourse profiling Muslim communities decreased minority engagement with CVE partnerships.¹¹³

[106] Research has shown that minority groups subjected to suspicion were less likely to report radicalisation concerns when government outreach was framed as policing rather than mutual public safety efforts¹¹⁴ and caused anger, alienation and reluctance to assist government-led CVE efforts.¹¹⁵

[107] In contrast, government rhetoric and messaging that emphasised shared democratic values, equal citizenship rights, and pride in diversity was shown to be more effective for maintaining trust in CVE policy. Innes argues maintaining consistent positive and inclusive messaging and avoiding othering language or simplistic group characterisations is crucial for securing ongoing minority buy-in for preventing extremism.¹¹⁶ A UK case study found Sikh cooperation on CVE improved following statements from officials denouncing hate crimes.¹¹⁷

[108] Spalek found that acknowledging discriminatory experiences increased minority receptiveness to participating in CVE initiatives.¹¹⁸ Her interviews across European countries found that addressing grievances around exclusion and integration policies enabled better community mobilisation against extremism.¹¹⁹

[109] It is important to note the potential conflation with the actions of elected representatives and government in communication, particularly when actors are perceived to share similar political leanings. In 2017, for example the leader of the One Nation party, Pauline Hanson wore a burqa into the Australian Parliament with the deliberate aim of polarising political debate. Despite swift rebuke from all major political parties, including the Liberal-

National coalition in Government, the action was interpreted as an attack on Muslim women and Islam indicative of embedded racism in the Australian political system,¹²⁰ in so doing strengthening claims by fringe extremists of a ‘war on Islam’ central to the narrative of Jihadi Salafist groups.¹²¹

[110] In Australia, Cherney and Murphy identified that procedural justice had an important role to play in building positive and trusting relationships with Muslim communities.¹²² Ultimately, political antagonistic rhetoric towards minorities correlates with reduced CVE cooperation by enabling exclusion,¹²³ whilst empathetic¹²⁴ and inclusive discourse enables collective prevention efforts.¹²⁵

Government Messaging during COVID-19

[111] Studies of Australian Government messaging within a CVE paradigm in the context of COVID-19 are limited. A broader array of studies identifies that public health discourse and its lexicon predominated during the pandemic.¹²⁶ This emphasised community safety and appreciation for the work of public servants,¹²⁷ however it also veered into strong condemnation, and at times, ridicule of freedom movement protesters.

[112] A range of narratives about the pandemic were prevalent while the government was communicating this public health-oriented messaging. These ranged from conspiratorial messages grounded in disinformation¹²⁸ and politically motivated messaging by extremist groups seeking to capitalise on dissent,¹²⁹ through to concern about government overreach and misuse of executive power.¹³⁰ Anger and anxiety were core driving emotions.¹³¹

[113] Relatively very few studies explore government messaging about anti-lockdown ‘freedom’ protests. Studies have noted that government messaging and news media have operated in unison to stigmatise sceptical beliefs and those who hold them.¹³² Significant concern existed about the manner of policing at protests.¹³³ There was however little research at the time of writing on the specific make up of ‘freedom movement’ protests.¹³⁴

[114] There was an apparent contradiction in government messaging about ‘acceptable’ progressive protest during the pandemic that arguably contributed to further societal polarisation. In the State of Victoria for example, a Good Friday Protest against the detention of Asylum seekers in April 2020 and a Black Lives Matter (BLM) affiliated protest about indigenous deaths in custody in June 2020 saw organisers fined, though more hardline police measures including arrests, only occurred at ‘freedom protests’¹³⁵ where an array of both community and extreme actors including Sovereign Citizens and extreme right activists were present.¹³⁶

[115] Governments in Australia generally secured the support of significant elements of the community. Kirk and MacDonald differentiate the language used in Australia from more hardline securitised language used overseas, noting that the Prime Minister at the time, Scott Morrison focused on the one hand on a ‘battle’ against the pandemic, but also mobilised altruistic tropes and empathetic messaging, talking about protecting the ‘most vulnerable’ from danger and emphasising both sacrifice and citizenship, messaging that contributed to majority support for Government actions during the early stages of the pandemic.¹³⁷

[116] Despite significant condemnation from his political opposition and those opposed to extended lockdowns, Victorian Premier Dan Andrews similarly enjoyed the trust of the majority of Victorians. In research exploring online representations of Andrews’s approach, where extremist narratives might be expected to flourish, Graham et al. identified that a significant grassroots campaign comprised of Andrews left-leaning constituency using the

hashtag #IStandWithDan actively countered negative narrative messaging. This acted as an accompaniment to government messaging online.¹³⁸

Summary

[117] Studies reveal divisive messaging that stigmatises minorities damages trust and willingness to cooperate with counter-extremism efforts.¹³⁹

[118] The majority of literature explores this prior to the pandemic, and governments at both the Federal and State level employed positive and constructive messaging to good effect throughout the pandemic. Positive inclusive rhetoric improves minority receptiveness to prevention initiatives.¹⁴⁰

[119] Little evidence exists about how criticism of anti-lockdown and ‘freedom movement’ protests impacted participants. It might be hypothesised that this contributed to their further marginalisation, however more research is required.

[120] These findings highlight the need for careful communication from political leaders to constructively shape societal attitudes and build civic partnerships around addressing extremism threats.

Best Practice Approaches to the Delivery of P/CVE Programs

Introduction

[121] Determining best practice approaches to P/CVE programs is an inherently challenging task. Malet notes that effective CVE policies require ‘clear metrics and benchmarks for results for success.’¹⁴¹ However, different nations may employ slightly different conceptions of countering violent extremism and measures of success. Measuring success by preventing terror attacks may be one measure, but other measures including maintaining community support for sustainable CVE programs and interdicting push, pull, and personal factors driving radicalisation, remain critical elements of this outcome.

[122] In addressing this question, best practice is considered to be the delivery of programs that simultaneously undermine factors driving radicalisation to violent extremism and work across the domains of social policy and law enforcement, whilst actively engaging communities. In this sense P/CVE becomes a ‘shared state and public responsibility that sees the combination of the government’s use of “hard” measures, including military, legal options, and financial incentives, with softer, public-sector approaches, such as participatory democracy, cultural integration, education, and psychosocial support.’¹⁴²

[123] The literature notes some common features of effective P/CVE policies and programs, key dimensions of which include the development of multiagency frameworks and the adoption of a whole-of-society approach, resting on durable community partnerships to address violent extremism. The literature also suggests that best practice approaches require multiagency frameworks and sustainable community partnerships.

The Importance of Multiagency Frameworks

[124] Research indicates the importance of multi-agency frameworks as critical for impactful CVE programs in democratic contexts. Detailed analyses of major partnership initiatives in Canada, Australia, Europe, and the UK determined that interagency collaboration enables the coordinated development of tailored, locally driven interventions that are well-attuned to specific radicalisation risks and community vulnerabilities.¹⁴³

[125] These studies present strong evidence that CVE programs drawing on the diverse expertise of mental health providers, social workers, educators, community leaders, and law enforcement build vital trust and avoid stigmatising minority communities as inherently “susceptible” to extremism, which severely undermines community engagement.¹⁴⁴

[126] In addition to interagency coordination, numerous impact evaluations indicate CVE programs effectively blending online and in-person delivery mechanisms optimises outcomes. Cherney’s experimental study of an Australian CVE intervention found that combined online ideological mentoring and in-person psychological counselling yielded significant pre-post improvements in attitudes rejecting extremist violence versus waitlist controls.¹⁴⁵ Follow-up surveys further showed enduring effects, pointing to the value of blended approaches. Accordingly, policy experts strongly advocate that integrated “blended” program models proactively adapted to leverage local resources and dynamics as international best practice.¹⁴⁶ Blended approaches allow prevention efforts to meet target populations “where they are” across contexts.

[127] Furthermore, emerging research highlights intensive family-based CVE initiatives as a highly promising approach for early intervention.¹⁴⁷ Equipping and empowering close family members to intervene with individuals of concern may provide a unique avenue for early, localised prevention efforts before extremism becomes entrenched.¹⁴⁸ When properly supported, families can be influential in mitigating emerging radical tendencies among relatives.¹⁴⁹

[128] Recent research has also highlighted the promise of arts-based and sports-based CVE programs, which can provide positive activities and build shared identities among youth vulnerable to radicalisation. For example, Marsden presented case studies showing team sports can enhance social bonds and psychosocial wellbeing as alternatives to extremist groups.¹⁵⁰ Whilst case studies alone do not constitute the rigorous evidence base required, it may be asserted that emerging evidence indicates that creative holistic initiatives leveraging diverse community resources have substantial potential.

[129] While rigorous empirical evaluation data remains limited, initial evidence indicates holistic multi-component national programs delivering a coordinated blend of preventative and resilience-building interventions have achieved significant impacts in reducing extremism when tailored to local contexts. Silke's comprehensive multi-method process evaluation found moderately positive psychosocial outcomes resulting from Austria's Deradicalisation and Disengagement program,¹⁵¹ which incorporated intensive counselling, ideological instruction, vocational mentorship, and social service support. Follow-up surveys showed mild improvements in intolerant attitudes among participants versus controls, illustrating promise.

[130] To combat radicalisation and hate-motivated violence in Canada, the Government of Canada and Public Safety Canada established the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and the Prevention of Violence (Canada Centre) in 2017, to assist in the ongoing national security efforts aimed towards combatting radicalisation, harm, and hate-motivated violence.¹⁵²

[131] The Canada Centre seeks to provide P/CVE policy guidance, promote collaboration between P/CVE practitioners and partners, fund, plan, coordinate, and mobilise research regarding radicalisation to violence, and strategies for countering these issues.¹⁵³ The Community Resilience Fund was established by the Canada Centre to support the Canadian P/CVE space through the funding of research efforts and organisations working to counter radicalisation, online radicalisation, radical and/or extremist ideologies, and hate-motivated violence.¹⁵⁴ Overall, the Canada Centre strives to build, share, and use knowledge regarding radicalisation, address online radicalisation, and support Canadian interventions.¹⁵⁵

[132] A multi-sectoral approach within Canadian P/CVE policy and practice has been crucial in the administration of P/CVE prevention and intervention-based programming. With practitioners from diverse fields working together to combat radicalisation and hate-motivated violence, a more holistic perspective and approach emerges for addressing this public safety issue.¹⁵⁶ The integration of community resources and supports, community organisations and partners, as well as community members within P/CVE programming has allowed for P/CVE strategies to reach those most vulnerable to radicalisation and hate-motivated violence in Canadian communities.

[133] In 2018, the Government of Canada, Public Safety Canada, and the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and the Prevention of Violence developed and implemented the *National Strategy on Countering Radicalization to Violence* which has sought to join efforts, policy, and practice across government(s), academia, law enforcement, and communities in countering radicalisation and hate-motivated violence.¹⁵⁷ The Strategy provides descriptions of radicalisation, radicalisation to violence and violent extremism, an understanding of the radicalisation trajectory, and outlines the Government of Canada's approach and priorities for P/CVE policy and

practice.¹⁵⁸ The United States recently implemented a similar policy known as the *National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism* (2021) to address the rapid increase in radical, extremist, and hate-motivated violence in the United States.¹⁵⁹

[134] The UK with its diverse religious and ethnic composition faced unique challenges in enacting a counterterrorism strategy without implicating its Muslim population. The UK Counter-Terrorism Strategy (CONTEST) rests on four pillars, including Prevent which attracts significant public attention. Prevent was introduced in 2003 as a community-oriented, preventative arm of the UK's counter-terrorism policy. Marsden's examination of the Prevent programme showed that its multi-agency structure measurably increased safeguarding capabilities and community engagement over time but asserts that its implementation record remains problematic.¹⁶⁰ In-depth interviews with officials revealed important lessons about proactively balancing security with social inclusion and minority empowerment. Marsden concluded that holistic, locally tailored, sustainably funded multi-component collaborative programs explicitly grounded in fostering inclusion alongside resilience showed the most tangible promise for impactfully countering violent extremism.

Integrating CVE with Social Inclusion Policies

[135] The 2021 update of the CONTEST counterterrorism strategy in the UK stated that any discrete prevention strategies must be accompanied by an equal prioritisation of social integration policies and efforts to remedy minority grievances.¹⁶¹

[136] The integration of CVE efforts with social inclusion policies, community development initiatives, and broader societal dynamics is an area of significant and increasing focus in the research literature.¹⁶² Scholars and practitioners underscore the need to understand and substantively address the social, economic, and psychological factors that contribute to extremism, situating CVE within the context of broader social structures and policies designed to promote inclusion, community cohesion, and psychological wellbeing.¹⁶³

[137] Marsden's comparative case studies of CVE programs across Europe illustrated the overarching salience of actively pursuing broader social inclusion efforts alongside any prevention activities.¹⁶⁴ His matched comparative analysis suggested that earnestly addressing grievances related to social marginalisation of minorities and ensuring genuinely inclusive developmental policies can engender crucial trust within communities, thereby meaningfully forestalling the development of deeper radicalisation pathways.

[138] Similarly, in an analysis of European CVE strategies, Montrond et al. argued based on extensive interview data, that initiatives explicitly designed to account for and remediate adverse socio-economic conditions, while prioritising inclusivity and minority empowerment, have substantially greater potential to thwart extremist narratives by offering credible, visible alternative pathways.¹⁶⁵ Elshimi asserts in a closely related vein that CVE must be firmly anchored within policies directly focused on empowering minority youth, encouraging active democratic participation, and tangibly increasing minority political representation and voice.¹⁶⁶ Such an approach helps avoid detrimental stigmatisation of minority groups and instead cultivates an authentic sense of belonging and active participation in society that inoculates against extremist ideological allure.

[139] In two separate studies, both based on a set of interview data, Marsden and Cherney have argued that effective CVE efforts are community-centred and community-driven, noting that such approaches are far more likely to engender genuine local engagement and prevent alienation of minority groups from authorities.

Community-led initiatives are markedly more likely to resonate organically with local populations and result in robust durable partnerships versus superficial compliance.¹⁶⁷

[140] C/PVE efforts have grown significantly across Canada and the United States in recent years following an increase in radical, extremist, and hate-driven ideologies and related acts. With these public safety threats in mind, Canadian efforts to counter radicalisation and hate-motivated violence have grown significantly over the past decade and include P/CVE-specific policy, as well as a vast range of prevention, intervention, and disengagement programs and initiatives that fall under the umbrella of P/CVE.¹⁶⁸

[141] Canadian and United States P/CVE has primarily been situated within a public health framework, wherein P/CVE practitioners and partners collaboratively deploy primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention and intervention strategies for countering the radicalisation process.¹⁶⁹ With the public health framework in mind, current Canadian P/CVE policy and programs constitute primary strategies, whereas intervention-based P/CVE programs fall under secondary and/or tertiary intervention.¹⁷⁰

[142] The utility of the public health model remains contested. Whilst some scholars have supported this conceptual paradigm,¹⁷¹ Hardy asserts that whilst this has become particularly influential in the United States, the analogy between violent extremism and disease is imperfect as it is not an injury to be treated by the medical profession and consequently translating strategies from public health to CVE remains difficult.¹⁷²

[143] Another crucial component of P/CVE policy and practice in Canada has been education. There have been increased calls by academics and P/CVE practitioners in Canada and the United States for the implementation of prevention and intervention-based P/CVE programming and resources within educational institutions, which may be useful in combating radicalisation, as well as radical, extremist, and hate-driven ideologies.¹⁷³ The implementation of educational resources within P/CVE programming, as well as the integration of P/CVE efforts within educational institutions may offer increased opportunities of support for vulnerable youth and those engaging with radical, extremist, and hate-motivated ideologies.¹⁷⁴ Employing the appropriate tools within educational settings, increased access to a variety of education-based resources, mental and psychological supports, and employment and/or volunteer opportunities can function as both preventative and intervention-based efforts in countering the radicalisation process.¹⁷⁵

[144] Akin to the Australian and European contexts, within the Canadian context, radicalisation and hate-motivated violence are not only public safety issues, but also broader societal issues and thus, require an “all-of-society” or a “whole-of-society” approach for both understanding, addressing, and countering these issues through P/CVE.¹⁷⁶ This approach refers to the importance of integrating both security-based and non-security-based partners and actors in the fight against radicalisation and hate-motivated violence.¹⁷⁷

Summary

[145] Australia and likeminded countries, particularly Five Eyes Partners, embrace an evidence-based approach to P/CVE. Across these nations there has been a focus on engaging communities as partners in P/CVE programs and a willingness to embrace community resilience models and a needs-based approach to intervention programming.

[146] Governments in likeminded countries have also commissioned monitoring and evaluation of research to assess programmatic effectiveness and impacts of counter-extremism measures on communities and individuals. There is a recognition among likeminded countries that more monitoring and evaluation is necessary to enhance continuous improvement.

[147] Research indicates that community and family-based supports have also informed prevention and intervention across social policy and law enforcement responses for disengagement from violent extremism in likeminded countries.

[148] More research is also required to understand what other nations are doing to inform their practice in professional development in a rapidly evolving threat environment and how they are offering support for intervention workers to address frontline challenges.

Societal Fault Lines Driving Unrest and Violence

Introduction

[149] The concept of a societal fault line is drawn from the natural science of geology, whereby a fracture occurs in a rock body.¹⁷⁸ The inevitable outcome of this fracturing is an earthquake, a seismic event that occurs when the rock breaks, resulting in devastation to the environment.¹⁷⁹ The analogy in a socio-scientific context refers to when societal divisions deepen to such an extent that they result in violence

[150] Social divisions and grievances have existed in Australia long prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and were, in the context of polarisation and decreasing trust, already vulnerable to exploitation by extremist groups prior to 2020. The pandemic has been argued to have exposed the cracks in Australia's "health, social, economic, government and political systems."¹⁸⁰ These divisions and grievances have been found to have deepened and worsened during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸¹

Pre-existing Fault Lines

[151] As identified above at Question One (paragraph [45]) societal polarisation was already prevalent and increasing prior to the pandemic.¹⁸² This was exacerbated by the pandemic, which saw levels of trust in government decline, particularly amongst those who felt most marginalised. Societal cohesion was challenged by the spread of disinformation and misinformation through social media (paragraph [56]) targeting migrant communities (paragraph [55]) and amplified by both populist political actors (paragraph [46]) and violent extremists (paragraphs [60] to [62]) alike, who sought to capitalise on both the deepening inequalities resulting from the pandemic and resultant emotional responses (paragraph [63]).

[152] Shergold et al.'s independent review into Australia's response to COVID-19 found that Australian policies were designed and implemented without appropriate regard for the inequalities that exist in Australian society and the vulnerabilities of key communities. This resulted in vulnerable Australians, including frontline workers, women, children, aged care residents, people with disabilities, ethnic communities, international students, expatriates and those already experiencing relative socio-economic disadvantage', suffering unnecessarily during the pandemic.¹⁸³ The authors also found that initiatives to address key existing societal fault lines in Australian society remained at the periphery of the planning process, rather than being placed at its core.¹⁸⁴

[153] Shergold et al. identify both economic inequalities and social divisions as key societal fault lines in the Australian context. The authors' study does not, however, identify how these fault lines drive domestic unrest and both individual and communal violence. While an increase in domestic violence and deteriorating mental health is identified,¹⁸⁵ there remains a significant gap in the Australian literature on research using the precise terminology of 'societal fault lines' and rising domestic unrest and community violence.

[154] It is helpful to view their contribution to both domestic unrest and communal violence through the framework outlined above (see paragraph [73]) of push factors to violent extremism, though also to consider the specific grievances exploited and given voice to by extremist groups, including those that employ violent rhetoric such as some Sovereign Citizen movements, which have achieved increased popularity in regional Australia and outer suburban locations.

[155] By considering the case of Sovereign Citizen movements, which have emerged from small and marginalised disparate groups numbering in the hundreds, to a relatively large anti-government extremist movement numbering in the thousands, it is possible to better articulate not only where these fault lines are emerging and rapidly growing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, but also how they have violent potential.

Sovereign Citizens: Exploiting Socio Economic, Regional, Outer Suburban and Age Based Fault Lines

[156] The name ‘Sovereign Citizen’ is considered an ‘umbrella term’¹⁸⁶ which may be understood as a ‘loosely affiliated group of individuals’ whose primary belief is the ‘illegitimacy of the Government’.¹⁸⁷ They do not recognise federal, state, or local laws, policies, or governmental regulations.¹⁸⁸ Sovereign Citizen beliefs are, due to their conspiratorial basis, complex and often difficult to unravel. Because there is no centralised leadership or cohesive text,¹⁸⁹ some aspects of belief and practices evolve based on local context, whilst others remain consistent across international borders.

[157] Experts discussing Sovereign Citizen practices usually note the use of pseudolaw. Pseudolaw may be understood as a collection of ‘legal-sounding, but false rules that purport to be law and replace conventional law... Pseudolaw is usually associated with a conspiratorial narrative or explanation for why pseudolaw is true but suppressed, a secret law known only to a few’.¹⁹⁰ Young, Hobbs and McIntyre claim that pseudolaw is a ‘a phenomenon where the form but not the substance of legal argumentation is used to advance a party’s position’.¹⁹¹

[158] Sovereign Citizen ideas have been present in Australia for many decades, including most notably, the declaration of the ‘Principality of Hutt River’ by farmer Leonard Casley in 1970. Non-academic, journalistic inquiry suggests that Australia has over 30 ‘micronations’,¹⁹² whilst many more exist internationally.¹⁹³ The vast majority of Sovereign Citizens, however, do not tie their claims to land. It is difficult to estimate numbers in Australia and New South Wales with any certainty. In 2015 New South Wales Police considered that 300 Sovereign Citizens were active in New South Wales.¹⁹⁴ Growth in the Australian context has however been exponential, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

[159] The prominence of the ‘red ensign’ at ‘freedom movement’ protests, often flown upside down, was a prominent characteristic of many of these protests and subject to media and scholarly attention alike, as they tried to make sense of its use before determining that Sovereign Citizens were behind its deployment.¹⁹⁵ In Canberra in December 2021 Sovereign Citizens attempted to connect their struggle to that of the Aboriginal tent Embassy, linking with fringe Indigenous activists the ‘Aboriginal Sovereign movement’, a member of which set fire to the old Australian Parliament House, causing over \$5 million damage.¹⁹⁶

[160] My Place Australia have grown their online profile exponentially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. From their base in Frankston, Victoria, as of May 2024, there are 185 My Place chapters including 60 in the State of Victoria, 51 in Queensland, 44 in the State of New South Wales, 17 in South Australia, 8 in Western Australia and 3 in Tasmania. The locations of chapters are primarily outer suburban and regional, as well as some large regional cities such as Geelong (899 members) and Bendigo (458 members) in Victoria, Newcastle (2000 Members) in New South Wales and Townsville (1200 members) in Queensland.¹⁹⁷

[161] Through My Place there has been an indigenisation of the Sovereign Citizen movement in the Australian context. The narrative arc of My Place posits that government is fundamentally corrupt, that the people are being exploited by a globalist agenda, and that they must rise up against financial exploitation and coercion from the government. The group’s leader Darren Bergwerf declared himself the mayor of the People’s Council of Frankston,

an alternative to the local council, seeking to contest elections to gain access to power. The groups manifesto, articulating its three-stage plan for revolution, which will ultimately require violence, to enact an alternative vision whereby ‘Lore’ (pseudolaw) will replace ‘law’, and the spiritual war ‘between GOD and Satan’ will be won.

[162] In contrast to many other Sovereign Citizen movements that frame their message primarily in a negative and reactionary sense, My Place messaging emphasises belonging, inclusion, and community. This appears to resonate for those in the outer suburbs and in particular, regional Australia. An analysis of My Place in their home state of Victoria reveals that over 12 per cent of their online chapters are in inner suburban areas. This more than doubles to just over 26 per cent for outer suburban areas. However, it is regional Victorians who appear most likely to be attracted to these movements.¹⁹⁸

[163] A very large proportion of just over 61 per cent of My Place chapters are in regional cities and towns.¹⁹⁹ This high figure contrasts with the fact that just 23 per cent of Victorians live in rural and regional Victoria. The Index of Relative Socioeconomic Disadvantage demonstrates that rural local government areas in Victoria are more likely to be classified as ‘most disadvantaged’.²⁰⁰ Furthermore, the average age of Victorians aged over 60 in rural and regional Victoria (26 per cent) is higher than in Greater Melbourne (18 per cent)²⁰¹ and residents are more likely to be white and speak English as a first language.²⁰²

[164] Whilst there is more research to be done on the precise demographics of Sovereign Citizen movements, it can be noted that the most successful recruitment terrain for My Place in the state of Victoria is regional and rural areas where there is significantly higher socio-economic disadvantage amongst populations who are older and less culturally diverse than in the City of Greater Melbourne.

[165] Whilst research indicates the existence of increasing inequalities at the socio-economic, regional, outer suburban and age-based levels, it is only through the public visibility of social movements such as Sovereign Citizens and My Place that the impact of these in shaping an attraction to extremist movements is demonstrated. Sovereign Citizen movements offering a sense of belonging and voicing grievances about, and at times, hatred for the government and legal system are grounded in socioeconomic marginalisation. They have found fertile terrain where societal fault lines are deepest. As outlined above at paragraphs [83] to [86], other extremist groups have demonstrated growth and an ability to exploit these fault lines to pull potential recruits to toward them in a similar manner.²⁰³

Gender Based Fault Lines: The Role of Masculinity in Violent Extremism

[166] Public debates and discussions around gender and the status of women in society are currently a dominant feature in Western, socio-political discourses. Gender identities and relations have become a focal point in the “culture wars” while authoritarian regimes and movements target women’s rights and women’s movements.²⁰⁴

[167] In an examination of the attraction of men to extreme right populist movements and violent extremism in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia, Roose argues that the social trajectories of some blue- and white-collar men have receded whilst women have simultaneously become more highly educated, successful in professional employment and enjoyed legislative protections against discrimination. This has driven anger, anxiety and a sense of alienation, whilst simultaneously for some, evoking a sense of shame, humiliation and resentment.²⁰⁵

[168] Prior to the pandemic, an anti-feminist backlash and emergence of online anti-women movements such as men’s rights movements and ‘Involuntary Celibates’ or ‘Incels’, was already evident.²⁰⁶ The Incel movement is

generally taken to refer to men who “describe themselves as unable to find women who are willing to engage in romantic relations with them.”²⁰⁷ The movement is not inherently ideologically informed but has developed into a fluid community increasingly connected to ideological precepts underscored by male supremacy, misogyny, and anti-feminism. Incels are largely an online movement, typically analysed via their social media engagement.²⁰⁸

[169] There is some consensus on the classes of masculinist narratives which also include Pick Up Artists (PUAs); Men’s Right Activists (MRAs) and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW).²⁰⁹ Despite some efforts by sites such as Reddit to deny access to extreme manifestations, the most radical Incels have found a safe space on websites including Incels.is and looksmax.org, where they are relatively free to express their hatred of women, and invocations to violence.²¹⁰ They express a shared sense of aggrieved entitlement, wherein they are precluded from the usual sexual privileges that are ostensibly meant to accrue to men.²¹¹ According to the Incel narrative increasing power and autonomy have made women more selective in their sexual partners – to the detriment of Incels. Violence is justified by some either as punishment, as a means of initiating the reversal of these trends, or both.

[170] Male supremacist ideology operates across a spectrum of primarily online actors known colloquially as ‘the manosphere’ and has been highly active in the spread of often violent misogynist messaging that accelerated during the pandemic. Communications and Media researchers have noted that ‘this amorphous network of online publics is noted for its virulent anti-feminism, extreme misogyny and synergies with the alt-right’.²¹²

[171] Extremist groups and movements take a reactionary stance on gender issues. Feminism, transgender rights, and ‘drag queen’ shows and events are strongly criticised by extreme right and conservative religious movements across Western contexts.²¹³ Since Incel forums and networks have been linked to recent violence, there is growing concern about them.²¹⁴ Recent studies show that extreme right gender ideologies are increasingly accepting misogynistic language. These ideologies promote ‘traditional’ masculinity and femininity. This trend is popular among European youth from diverse backgrounds. Reactionary Muslim youth in Northern Europe share these views.²¹⁵ Beyond a wider body of protesters, extreme right activists globally have used LGBTQIA+ and trans rights attacks to promote their cause, targeting pride events and drag queen story hours.

[172] An increasing body of research literature explores the use of masculinities as a recruitment mechanism to violent extremist groups across the spectrum of religious and political actors. Masculinity may be understood simply here as the ‘social construction of what it is to be a man’.²¹⁶ Studies demonstrate that extreme right, textualist religious groups including Salafi jihadists, fundamentalist Christians and manosphere actors share a preoccupation with reasserting the dominant position of men in society as breadwinners, heads of households, and ‘warriors’, re-establishing ‘traditional’ feminine roles in the home and as mothers raising the next generation of the faith or race.²¹⁷

[173] In a comprehensive study of the use of masculinity in recruitment by extremist actors in Australia in a study funded by the Victorian Department of Justice and Community Safety in 2020, Roose, Flood and Alfano found that extreme right and male supremacist groups examined in the study, including the Lads Society, a progenitor of the National Socialist Network, as well as manifestos from terrorists including Brenton Tarrant and the Islamic State Movement all mobilised the intersection of masculinity and anger in their narrative messaging to appeal to potential recruits.²¹⁸

Summary

[174] The pandemic has had the impact of deepening pre-existing societal fault lines. Increasing inequalities are compounding socio-economic fault lines, with gaps emerging between wealthier and more established inner suburbs and outer suburban and rural localities. Gaps between older and younger Australians and migrant Australians are also key challenges. Sovereign Citizen movements are an example of one group that benefits from these fault lines, articulating anti-government grievances in building a movement with a history of violent extremism overseas and violent extremist potential in Australia.

[175] A gender-based fault line is emerging globally. In the context of social change, some men are experiencing stagnating or downward social trajectories, contributing to an anti-feminist and anti-women backlash from some. This backlash is exploited by extremist movements who seek to reinvigorate traditional gender and sexuality hierarchies.

[176] Despite the increasing intersection of societal fault lines, their impact and their exploitation by movements with strong violent extremist rhetoric and potential, little research in the field of academic CVE literature adequately explores these intersections. More work is required to understand how socio-economic developments are contributing to the emergence of violent extremism in Australia.

Motivational Bases of Radicalisation to Violence

Introduction

[177] Traditional political, religious, and ideological beliefs with a comprehensive worldview contributing to radicalisation to violence remained an important component of the threat landscape. Extreme right and Islamist movements remain influential in shaping attraction to and enactment of violent extremist acts.

[178] Other social movements with grievance-fuelled motivations grounded in frustration have evolved dramatically, including Sovereign Citizen, Incel, and conspiratorial movements. A research gap exists in how we understand the potential pathways to violence in the Australian context of these movements.

[179] Other, new forms of ‘composite’, ‘salad bar’, or ‘ideologically promiscuous’ movements have emerged in the context of the pandemic as individuals spent more time online. Individuals and groups select elements of ideologies and conspiracy theories to suit their personal grievances. More research is required to understand this decision-making process and how these movements manifest in new forms of violence.

[180] It is important to consider the transmission of ideologies and grievances. The passage of these from influential individuals who subsequently inspire, yet remain distant from, the attacker is known as stochastic terrorism and is an important component of the current threat landscape. More research is required to explore the intersection of ideology and grievance in shaping the attraction to these figures.

[181] Ideological convergences between groups are also important. Anti-women, antisemitic and anti-LGBTIQ+ attitudes exist as ideological commonalities across extreme right, Islamist, conspiratorial and Incel movements, uniting potential targets for violence. More work is required to unpack how this may shape pathways to violence and cross-pollination.

Diversification in Ideologies Driving Radicalisation

[182] Several scholars highlight the blurred lines between ideological narratives. Hoffman and Ware observed the “multiple unique ideological streams” within the extreme right that “often converge with one another, blurring boundaries between ideologies”.²¹⁹ Brace et al. make reference to “fringe fluidity,” “composite violent extremism” and “mixed, unclear and unstable (MUU) extremist ideologies”,²²⁰ noting that the latter is characterised by worldviews that coalesce sometimes disparate and evolving ideological components, making them hard to identify and situate.²²¹

[183] Ideology is a feature of violent extremism that distinguishes it from other forms of mass violence.²²² The word belies real-world complexity, but in the context, it refers to an organised set of beliefs that give rise to and offer meaning to acts of violence. Ideology matters in understanding how offenders rationalise or justify what they do, and it matters for attempts to understand what leads someone to engage in violent acts.

[184] Broadly speaking, “radicalisation” to violent extremism either involves a process whereby some people become exposed to certain ideas and engage in violence as a result; or whereby people already on a path to violence ‘use’ ideological content as a post-hoc rationalisation. Recent developments are encouraging a re-examination of core assumptions about the nature of ideology and the relationship with individual actors. This includes how

terrorist actors sometimes appear to change ‘direction’ from one orientation to another, as well as offenders who seem to pick and choose elements of different ideologies to suit their needs.²²³

[185] In the contemporary and particularly post COVID-19 era, research has been undertaken to better understand how and why terrorist and violent extremist movements are demonstrating significantly greater breadth of ideological influences on their actions. Key research has referred to the ‘ideological promiscuity’ of contemporary movements.²²⁴ Others refer to ‘salad bar extremism’, ‘fringe fluidity’, ‘choose your own adventure extremism’ and ‘composite violent extremism’.²²⁵ All address the same basic challenge of understanding political and religious ideological diversity in contemporary violent extremism.

[186] The rise of fixated threat assessment centres across Australia is partially a testament to concerns about acts of public violence that defy neat categorisation. In the US, former FBI Director Christopher Wray has highlighted what he argued was an emerging trend of actors who “don’t fit into nice, neat ideological buckets”.²²⁶ Authorities in the United Kingdom have characterised such actors as “mixed, unstable or unclear”,²²⁷ whilst Gartenstein-Ross says this reflects “violent extremists who display an amalgamation of different disparate beliefs, interests and grievances”.²²⁸

[187] These cases raise questions about *which* parts of ideology matter. Gartenstein-Ross and colleagues suggest that the recent cases herald a new “paradigm” of violent extremism.²²⁹ They encourage that the composite nature of contemporary attackers’ ideologies is wholly distinct. This they call, “composite violent extremism”. Based on their study of 28 cases, Gartenstein-Ross and team proposed what they called the Composite Violent Extremism (CoVE) framework.²³⁰ This contains a fourfold typology of: *Ambiguous* (where there were no clearly discernible ideologies, and instead a range of sentiments); *Mixed* (multiple clearly discernible ideologies, and a range of sentiments); *Fused* (where there was a discernible core ideology mixed with other sentiments); and *Convergent* (one ideology, overlapping interests with other ideologies).

[188] Conspiracy theories have long been recognised as a feature of terrorism-related ideologies,²³¹ but more recently have been recognised as a mobilising influence in their own right. As outlined above at paragraph [156], movements such as Sovereign Citizens are fuelled by anti-government grievances. The potential for conspiracy theories to mobilise people to action is documented,²³² however more work is needed on how conspiracies, ideologies, and pathways to violence interact. Rahlf suggests conspiracy theories transcend individual ideologies, providing an umbrella mechanism for “processing adverse experiences and anxieties” across multiple contexts.²³³ A feature of this unifying quality is that they are “increasingly directed against the political order, fostering anti-democratic attitudes and actions”.²³⁴ Rahlf notes that dissent aimed at government actions to stem COVID managed to garner “cross-milieu solidarity between the extreme right and far left, esotericists, anti-vaxxers, and other ‘engaged citizens.’”²³⁵ A heterogenous collective was unified by a perception of a government “endangering the individual” and acting “as a harbinger of dictatorship or apocalypse”.²³⁶

[189] The challenge is not only accurate characterisation, but knowing what focal point offers the best implications for response. Furthermore, common psychological themes transcend certain ideologies – such as the themes of nihilism offered by recent violent attackers via manifestos, or other online statements. Research on these issues is nascent and will be important to understand the current moment in violent extremism.²³⁷

[190] Religion has often been implicated in broader ideological processes of engagement with violence, particularly in relation to Salafi Jihadism.²³⁸ Several recent papers implicate religiosity within recent processes of extremism – particularly the interweaving of apocalyptic-millenarian narratives with COVID-19. Ackerman and

Peterson track the development of such end-of-times narratives within the recent context, suggesting that groups such as Aum Shinrikyo and the Covenant, the Sword and the Arm of the Lord may be using the pandemic – seen by them as “evocative of biblical plagues and divine punishments” – as a catalyst for conducting wider violence.²³⁹ Early reporting of the December 2022 Wieambilla attack in Queensland and pronouncements by security and policing agencies suggest that the attack was motivated by dispensational premillennialism, which features an apocalyptic ‘end times’ worldview.

[191] Concern around the development of apocalyptic conspiracy beliefs has led to studies into what factors cause them to become prevalent within a certain group or milieu. Dyrendal and Hestad found that conspiracy mentality, an existing lack of trust in authority, and higher levels of religiosity were directly correlated with conspiracy beliefs about COVID-19 in Norway.²⁴⁰ Similar links were found between the COVID-19 scepticism, extremist attitudes and religious framing in a study on supernatural and apocalyptic beliefs towards vaccines.²⁴¹

[192] High levels of religious belief were also found to be linked to political polarisation, with COVID-19 exacerbating cleavages between the Christian-religious Right and the less religious Left. Perry et al. find this cleavage key in explaining the large sceptical response to the pandemic in the US, driven by a disregard for scientific expertise, a conception of Americans as God's chosen people, high levels of distrust for news media, and strong allegiance to Christian nationalism.²⁴²

[193] Whilst religion has been seen as a motivating factor in conspiracy and extremism, some studies have critiqued the implication that religion is a relevant factor. MacMillen and Rush suggest that the link is not enough to cause extremism, arguing that conspiracy simply helps to support a unifying theory of conflict and narration of history under the banner of “hidden knowledge”.²⁴³ Tytarenko and Bogachevska, in their study of religious extremism around COVID in Eastern and Central Europe, found that in every religious community studied, some believers disagreed with lockdown restrictions and that often this was predicated on the belief that God's authority overrode that of the State.²⁴⁴ However, they found no correlation between manifestations of COVID fundamentalism and levels of religiosity, emphasising that extreme beliefs were not widespread.

[194] Yendell and Herbet examined the relationship between religion, conspiracy beliefs and political culture in the UK.²⁴⁵ They find that belief in conspiracy theories are highly related to anti-Muslim sentiments, anti-Black racism, and right-wing extremism.²⁴⁶ They also find that fundamentalist religious beliefs – but crucially no other religious indicators – were associated with tendency towards conspiracy; and that other factors such as social media use and traits such as narcissism and authoritarian personalities also impacted on support for conspiracy theories and inclination towards violent extremism.

Stochastic Terrorism: Ideology or Grievance?

[195] In considering the motivational bases of radicalisation to violent extremism, it is also important to consider the emergence of stochastic terrorism and the link with lone wolf attackers who may be motivated by a range of ideological influences and grievances.

[196] The concept of stochastic terrorism describes a process through which a speaker or actor, through public rhetoric and/or actions (including the use of terrorist violence and manifestos), communicates a narrative and creates a climate that increases the likelihood of violence without directing a specific individual to commit a specific act.²⁴⁷

[197] The 2019 terror attack by Brenton Tarrant which killed 51 Muslims and injured 40 more at mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand was a key example of an act and messaging that has inspired others. It included the release of a manifesto prior to the attack, livestreaming the attack and attempting to use the prosecution and subsequent court case as a platform to advance his extreme right ideological views. Tarrant has influenced a number of lone actor terrorist attacks since 2019, including the Buffalo shooting in 2022, which killed 10 and injured three.²⁴⁸

[198] Stochastic terrorism and lone actor terrorists challenge the traditional understanding of terrorism as enacted by terrorist organisations against traditional targets. The entire process is determined by individual nuances, including what the lone attacker integrates into their ideological perspective and the target they seek to attack.²⁴⁹

[199] Research indicates a difference between violence enacted to advance a political or religious ideology, such as the Christchurch terror attack specifically targeting Muslims (including the release of a political manifesto) and attacks done with purely murderous intent or based on personal grievances such as the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting by 64-year-old Stephen Paddock, killing 60, wounding 413, and resulting in over 860 injured. One attack seeks real world change, the other is destructive and aimed at punishment and inflicting pain.²⁵⁰

Nativism/Nationalism/White Supremacy

[200] For all its ideological diversity and lack of cohesion, the extreme right continues to be characterised by its attachment to values commensurate with nativism, nationalism and white supremacy.²⁵¹ Each of these threads assumes that Whiteness is under threat from multiple directions – policies of inclusion and multiculturalism, non-White immigration, and men of colour as criminal threats.

[201] The Proud Boys, an extreme right male only movement, have regularly stood opposed to immigration, feminism, social justice movements, LGBTQIA+ movements, and anti-fascist (antifa) mobilisation.²⁵² The manifesto of the Christchurch shooter Brenton Tarrant – a white supremacist who – drew attention to one of the key tenets of the contemporary white supremacist movement is an important example. The Great Replacement Theory posits that the “replacement” of white Christians is an ongoing process, spearheaded by Jews, globalists and elites. Akin to previous iterations of “white genocide”, it insists on a conscious effort to eliminate whiteness through such patterns as black on white crime, multiculturalism policies, interracial relationships – all of which are said to be manipulated by a mysterious cabal.²⁵³

[202] The Great Replacement Theory is but one of many contemporary conspiracy theories that lay the foundation for extremist violence, positing an existential threat to the White, Christian, and often masculinist world.²⁵⁴ Initially grounded in the claim that Donald Trump was waging a war against an elite cabal of satanic paedophiles, QAnon and its successors have spun a litany of conspiracy theories to delegitimise the current political order.²⁵⁵ Chapelan’s exploration of “stigmatised knowledge” as held by right-wing extremists in France and the US identifies six key “topoi” that characterise these COVID conspiracy theories, including hysteria, “sheeple,” and authoritarianism/tyranny.²⁵⁶ Conspiracy theories also give rise to anti-authority narratives,²⁵⁷ linked to acts of mass and individual extremist violence.

[203] With the onset of the pandemic, QAnon conspiracy theories that predated COVID-19 were given new life with extremists laying the blame for the virus, variously, on Bill Gates, Jews, and nebulous “elites”.²⁵⁸ In particular, scholars have commented on the ways in which “government overreach” or the lockdowns of the “police state” have been exploited to harness hostility toward government authorities.²⁵⁹ Canadian anti-authority activists

garnered international attention during the so-called “Freedom Convoy” in February 2022, involving the coalescence of extreme right mobilisation, COVID-19 related anti-mandate protests, and anti-government sentiments.

[204] Anti-authority narratives have increasingly coalesced around accelerationism,²⁶⁰ which posits that societal collapse is imminent and should be hastened. Adherents to this strategic premise, including extreme right terror group ‘The Base’, which is proscribed in Australia, seek to accelerate this event through acts of violence. They typically believe that politically motivated violence will serve as a catalyst for some form of civil war that will result in the creation of a utopic vision of a white Christian ethno-state.²⁶¹ The expansion of accelerationism’s influence risks extremist violence, as accelerationists are among the most likely actors to engage in and encourage violence as a means of attaining their goal.²⁶²

Summary

[205] Traditional political, religious, and ideological beliefs with a comprehensive worldview contributing to radicalisation to violence remained an important component of the threat landscape. Extreme right and Islamist movements remain influential in shaping attraction to and enactment of violent extremist acts.

[206] Other social movements with grievance-fuelled motivations grounded in frustration have evolved dramatically, including Sovereign Citizen, Incel, and conspiratorial movements. A research gap exists in how we understand the potential pathways to violence in the Australian context of these movements.

[207] Other, new forms of ‘composite’, ‘salad bar’, or ‘ideologically promiscuous’ movements have emerged in the context of the pandemic as individuals spent more time online. Individuals and groups select elements of ideologies and conspiracy theories to suit their personal grievances. More research is required to understand this decision-making process and how these movements manifest in new forms of violence.

[208] It is important to consider the transmission of ideologies and grievances. The passage of these from influential individuals who subsequently inspire yet remain distant from the attacker is known as stochastic terrorism and is an important component of the current threat landscape. More research is required to explore the intersection of ideology and grievance in shaping the attraction to these figures.

[209] Ideological convergences between groups are also important. Anti-women, antisemitic and anti-LGBTIQA+ attitudes exist as ideological commonalities across extreme right, Islamist, conspiratorial and Incel movements, uniting potential targets for violence. More work is required to unpack how this may shape pathways to violence and cross-pollination.

Radicalisation in Prisons

Introduction

[210] Scholars and policymakers have identified prisons as important intervention points in combating radicalisation, violent extremism and terrorism.²⁶³ Prisons are environments where individuals who have been radicalised and have committed acts of terror are contained, disrupting future opportunities to engage in such behaviours. However, the prison setting may potentially exacerbate radicalisation and extremist beliefs by exposing inmates to individuals with similar or more extreme views.²⁶⁴

[211] Those tasked with case management are required to understand, detect, and disrupt radicalisation among the prison population. Ignoring or ineffectively addressing the problem not only poses risks for the prison population and staff but could ignite or further fuel certain individuals' commitment to extreme beliefs and potentially lead to acts of violence post-release.²⁶⁵

[212] Policymakers have noted the urgent need to: (a) understand the nature of radicalisation within prisons; (b) identify best practices in the prevention and countering of radicalisation; and (c) conduct rigorous evaluations of existing and novel prevention and intervention methods.²⁶⁶

[213] The sense of urgency surrounding these objectives has been heightened in recent years due to growing prison populations in some nations and the impact of COVID-19 on prison management and processes.²⁶⁷ Concerning the latter, in order to prevent transmission of the COVID-19 virus, prisons in several countries (including Australia) suspended in-person visitations and social service programs for inmates.²⁶⁸ This also meant that inmates were isolated for extended periods of time and those entering the prison system were quarantined and transferred frequently. The added levels of social isolation and experiences of uncertainty negatively impacted the mental health of prisoners,²⁶⁹ and likely compounded feelings of injustice and grievances, both of which are risk factors for radicalisation and extremism more generally.²⁷⁰

Radicalisation and Prisons

[214] Although imprisonment itself is one method of containing and disrupting extremist violence, criminologists have suggested that the climate and characteristics of prisons, as well as the moral code of inmates can facilitate or neutralise radicalisation.²⁷¹ For example, new inmates are typically confronted with harsh and insecure conditions. To cope, these individuals must adapt their beliefs and behaviours to seek protection, belonging, and membership within existing inmate subgroups.²⁷²

[215] To better understand issues surrounding radicalisation in prison environments, scholars have typically focused on four lines of research; (1) understanding and measuring (de-) radicalisation in prisons, (2) staff training and risk assessments, (3) placement strategies for violent extremists within prisons, and (4) the release of convicted violent extremists.

Radicalisation and Australian Prison Research

[216] Most of the Australian research identified in the review focused on understanding and measuring (de-) radicalisation in prison.²⁷³ Some of these studies tangentially addressed issues relating to the release of convicted extremists in the community after they had served their sentence.²⁷⁴

[217] Cherney et al. conducted a study to better understand the push and pull factors of radicalisation among a small group of Australian and Indonesian inmates,²⁷⁵ and found that in this limited sample, imprisonment *reduced* radicalisation levels. This demonstrated that the prison setting triggered critical self-reflection for these inmates. Through this process the inmates experienced a sense of regret about how their actions had a detrimental impact on their lives and that of their families, in particular.

[218] The remaining studies focused on assessing the efficacy of interventions used within prisons to de-radicalise and disengage extremist inmates. For instance, Cherney evaluated the utility of the Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM) which was delivered to inmates within a New South Wales (NSW) corrections facility.²⁷⁶

[219] Cherney's study demonstrated that PRISM does achieve some beneficial outcomes with respect to de-radicalisation and disengagement. He notes that the key motivator reported by inmates in participating in the intervention (i.e., showing that they are not a threat) provided an opportunity for self-reflection. This opened the door for PRISM staff to begin addressing and shifting radicalised beliefs and attitudes. More specifically, during periods of self-reflection, PRISM staff were able to assist inmates to understand the nature of their radical beliefs and equip them to identify and resist other more charismatic inmates from further radicalising them and fuelling their grievances. For Muslim inmates, this process of de-radicalisation and disengagement involved PRISM staff facilitating a more pluralistic understanding of Islam. As a result, Muslim inmates were able to begin thinking about their religion in a more sophisticated manner on multifaceted aspects of their faith, such as jihad.

[220] In a similar study, Cherney and Belton set out to evaluate change amongst inmates completing the PRISM intervention against Barrelle's (2015) pro-integration model of extremist disengagement.²⁷⁷ In explaining the rationale for assessing the utility of PRISM against a framework for terrorist de-radicalisation, Cherney and Belton note while various evaluation frameworks and metrics have been proposed in earlier research, few have been tested against actual program data. The researchers selected Barrelle's (2015) model because it has informed the initial thinking around the development of PRISM, in addition to the risk assessment tool known as RADAR, which is used to determine risks, identify needs, and develop tailored intervention plans.

[221] Cherney and Belton's study included three clients (two Muslim extremists and 1 white supremacist) that had four different data points to ascertain whether progress was made across Barrelle's (2015) pro-integration domains. Data sources used in the study were client and staff interviews, progress reports written by PRISM staff and case notes. The study, notwithstanding its small sample, demonstrated that the three inmates had made improvements across different behavioural and cognitive domains that the pro-integration model posits relevant to de-radicalisation. Although progress against the domains varied, coding changes against the domains allowed for greater understanding on where (and how) progress towards de-radicalisation was occurring (e.g., resisting and challenging radicalisation within prison) and where further improvements were needed.²⁷⁸

[222] Cherney notes that because PRISM is an in-custody pilot programme, its extension to the community corrections setting is not well understood and requires further formulation (and resourcing). Despite this, prison staff involved in the PRISM programme in Cherney's study supported such an extension in managing (de-) radicalisation and ensuring case management continuity.²⁷⁹

Radicalisation and International Prison Research

[223] Greater variety exists across international research on prison radicalisation in comparison to the Australian literature reviewed above. For instance, the review yielded studies that examined each of the four priority research themes noted in prior studies. Moreover, the methodological approach adopted by scholars internationally to examine the problem of prison radicalisation is more heterogeneous. For instance, the studies that had a focus on understanding and measuring (de-)radicalisation in prison settings draw on ethnographic observations,²⁸⁰ surveys of inmates,²⁸¹ and interviews with prison staff,²⁸² or inmates.²⁸³ The variety in methodological approach of international research on prison radicalisation provides a complete picture with some studies highlighting radicalisation as being an ever-present and growing threat²⁸⁴ and others noting the opposite.²⁸⁵

[224] Williams and Liebling, for instance, considered how prisons and prisoner leadership causes the radicalisation of inmates.²⁸⁶ With a four-person research team they carried out ethnographic observations and interviews over a five-month period across two high security prisons. A total of 70 staff and 100 prisoners were interviewed. Williams and Liebling's study showed that religious identity can be used to establish subgroups with distinct hierarchies and conflict management strategies that borrow from Islamic tradition (e.g., Emir). These groups exert pressure on more vulnerable inmates to conform to strict religious practice and support instances of violence or intimidation towards non-Muslim inmates, staff members as well as Muslim minority groups. Notably, Williams and Liebling found that instances of inhumane treatment of Muslim inmates or apathy towards non-Muslims by prison staff (e.g., chaplains) could be used as ammunition by charismatic and authoritative Muslim inmates to stoke animosity and, in one example, physical violence towards prison staff (e.g., three Muslim inmates held a prison staff member hostage).²⁸⁷

[225] Interestingly, other research finds that radicalisation in prison is not a threat under some circumstances. For example, Bucarius et al. examined the relationship between prison subcultures and prison radicalisation in Canadian prisons.²⁸⁸ Their study drew on semi-structured interviews with 148 incarcerated men and 131 correction officers across four Canadian prisons. Bucarius et al. found no evidence of radicalisation across the prison sites in their study. The participants interviewed noted that prison subcultural values were hostile to radical groups and their messaging. Three overarching subcultural values that hampered prison radicalisation were identified. First, inmates held prosocial views on multiculturalism in Canada. The inmates stated that they would not tolerate perceived radicals discriminating against or voicing hatred towards others. Second, the inmates had the opportunity to interact across racial and ethnic groups because race and ethnicity were not barriers to interaction in the same way as they are in other contexts. This lack of segregation, seemed to offer greater opportunities to share views, exchange opinions and form mutual alliances against radical groups (i.e., 'contact hypothesis').²⁸⁹ Finally, although prison subculture dictates that inmates should refrain from voluntary interactions with corrections officers, this did not apply to communications (i.e., 'snitching') about potential radicals or extremist inmates.²⁹⁰

[226] Recognising that prison staff are the frontline defence against radicalisation in correctional settings, some international studies have examined staff understanding and training with respect to extremism and parts of radicalisation. These studies highlight that, while there has been increasing concern among policymakers about the problem of radicalisation in prisons, little effort has been made to better equip prison staff to address the problem on the ground.²⁹¹ This limited understanding of radicalisation by prison staff has led some jurisdictions to develop locally tailored staff training programs.²⁹²

[227] The remainder of studies captured in the search deal with evaluating the utility of existing de-radicalisation programs. A literature review by Axelsson et al. focused on identifying viable management and treatment methods

and approaches to (a) preventing violent extremism in prison and probation services and (b) the management of violent extremist clients in prison and probation services.²⁹³ Drawing on twenty-seven primary studies, Axelsson et al. identified three themes capturing the common finding across the studies. The themes were building trust, building resilience, and facilitating pro-social engagement. In other words, ‘soft approaches’ to the management of violent extremists appear to be more fruitful in promoting the rehabilitation of violent extremist inmates than harsh and restrictive measures. The latter may in fact reinforce grievances and radicalisation. Individual approaches that capture the three themes identified by Axelsson et al. include individually tailored interventions alongside placement and security regimes that allow for greater interaction between staff and inmates.²⁹⁴

[228] Several critical questions remain unanswered by current de-radicalisation and disengagement intervention studies. Such questions include what type of programs work best and which intervention components are driving the success of specific programs. Additionally, it is still unclear from a psychological perspective, the exact nature of the psycho-social process that the de-radicalisation and disengagement programs facilitate among already radicalised and/or at-risk individuals.

International Considerations for the Australian Context

[229] There are several take-away points from the international literature. First, the nature of radicalisation is closely tied to the climate of the specific prison including its day-to-day operations. This is evidenced by some studies showing harsh and distant treatment of inmates exacerbating animosity and grievances held by extremist inmates.²⁹⁵ These feelings can reinforce radical attitudes and lead to violent behaviours targeted at other inmates or staff. Whereas other studies directly and indirectly show that prison climates that are characterised by humane treatment and trust building have less concern about radicalisation among both inmates and staff.²⁹⁶

[230] Second, given that prison staff are on the frontline against signs of radicalisation in prisons, their understanding of the radicalisation process, risk assessments, and intervention strategies must be well developed. However, the review of available literature suggests that this is not the case.

[231] Third, while there is a growing acknowledgement of the importance of evaluations of de-radicalisation interventions, few studies have been conducted in this area. Moreover, the studies that exist are limited by the absence of longitudinal data and more importantly widely accepted metrics around de-radicalisation and disengagement.²⁹⁷

[232] Finally, although overlooked relative to other individual and group-level explanations for radicalisation in prisons, placement strategy can influence the radicalisation of prisoners. Policymakers typically assume that concentrating convicted extremists allows for easier monitoring and management of behaviour within prison.²⁹⁸ This approach is also thought to segregate extremist inmates from other more vulnerable inmate subgroups. Yet, the concentration approach presents several challenges to both the safety of staff and the rehabilitation of extremist inmates. One criticism, for example, is that the concentration approach may confer feelings of status which may reinforce extremist views and sense of grievance. These feelings may have negative implications for rehabilitation prospects.²⁹⁹

[233] While the placement strategy adopted will ultimately be guided by both legislation and the availability of infrastructure, dispersal is another alternative to the concentration approach.³⁰⁰ The dispersal strategy involves scattering extremist inmates throughout various prisons around a state or country to encourage rehabilitation and separate any existing associations. This approach is adopted in several countries in the UK, Netherlands, France,

and in the state of Victoria (Australia).³⁰¹ A potential benefit of the dispersal method is that extremist inmates become a minority within a specific correctional centre, and their views are less likely to be reinforced by likeminded individuals.

[234] There are concerns, however, that the dispersal method would risk exposing vulnerable inmates to radicalising influences. However, scholars have previously noted that – while a rare event – radicalisation typically occurs through one-on-one interactions with charismatic leaders.³⁰² Yet, the fear that ordinary extremist inmates will radicalise new extremist inmates persists. The literature surrounding this view (albeit limited) suggests that the source of the message is just as important as the message itself.³⁰³

Summary

[235] Whether – and above all, *how* – prisons shape radicalisation continues to be debated by social science scholars. Although imprisonment itself is one method of containing and disrupting extremist violence, criminologists have suggested that the climate and characteristics, as well as the moral code of inmates can facilitate or neutralise radicalisation.

[236] Most of the Australian research that this review yielded focused largely on understanding and measuring (de-) radicalisation in prison, including the efficacy of interventions within prisons to de-radicalise and disengage extremist inmates. A smaller amount explored recidivism. Overall, the Australian research on radicalisation and prison is sparse and constitutes an important gap in knowledge.

[237] Critical questions remain unanswered by current de-radicalisation and disengagement intervention studies including what type of programs work best and which intervention components are driving the success of specific programs, especially among already radicalised and/or at-risk individuals.

[238] More research is needed on enhancing educational programs for both prison and community corrections staff that cover radicalisation and different extremist ideologies, as well as the conceptualisation of radicalisation, de-radicalisation, and disengagement.

[239] Further research is required on extending in-custody interventions programs such as PRISM into the community corrections context (or at the very least piloting an extension).

Pre-Attack Online Behaviour by Terrorists

Introduction

[240] A range of research literature reveals insights into how terrorists both behave online and plan their attacks, the role that the internet plays in radicalisation and the concept of leakage, which refers to the unintentional communication of intent by an attacker, may reveal whether an attack is imminent. This section explores research on the digital footprint left by attackers online before exploring the use of the internet by radicalised actors and how this may shape their attraction to violent extremism.

Digital Footprint

[241] Though it is well established that terrorist actors (whether group-based or seemingly autonomous) use Internet platforms for a multiplicity of reasons, investigations into the behaviour of lone-actor terrorist attackers *in particular* reveal that attackers often left a large digital footprint.³⁰⁴ Online histories suggested that attackers not only spent a lot of time online consuming and sharing extreme content,³⁰⁵ but also posting statements about their general views, grievances, ideological leanings, and even intent to commit acts of targeted violence.

[242] These are often expressed via “manifestos”, which range in size, quality, and originality. Thus, in addition to leaving real-world indicators of intent, attackers often provide elaborate public statements of intent, justification, and possible inspiration for others to emulate.³⁰⁶

[243] A question emerges as to whether these indicators can reliably predict violence. A recent study of leakage in 12 cases of lone actor terrorism addressed the time lapse between a terrorist manifesto appearing online and the subsequent associated attack.³⁰⁷ The results indicated the average time lapse is 1 hour and 43 minutes. Furthermore, the researchers calculated the average time of day in which manifestos were posted online – 2.16pm, suggesting the most attacks happen mid to late afternoon.

[244] The venues in which the manifestos appeared differed. They ranged from private email to 4chan/8chan bulletin boards, to YouTube, Facebook Live, attackers’ own privately registered websites, and discord servers.³⁰⁸ While the existence and detection of such manifestos may provide researchers and analysts with valuable insight into the motives and mindsets of attackers, the time lapse doesn’t suggest easy avenues for early intervention.

[245] There appears to be a broad academic consensus that if someone is actively seeking out violent extremist material online, they are “at greater risk of radicalising and engaging in violence”.³⁰⁹ Studies have not so far been able discern what specific linguistic or other online behavioural features might distinguish those with a propensity or intent to commit an act of real-world violence, nor the experiences of those who engage with such extremist material, though do not then proceed to embrace violent extremism.

[246] One study by Mills et al., using a small and non-representative sample suggests that the internet is more important in the radicalisation of right-wing extremists, compared to jihadists.³¹⁰ Most studies of the internet as a pathway to right-wing violent extremism point to a common theme – that “exposure most commonly occurred after a “friend” in the offline world who they knew and trusted directed them to violent extremist materials online”.³¹¹

[247] Shared underlying motivational factors (as opposed to factors that may be distinct from ideology to ideology) may better illuminate pathways the violence. The past five years have seen greater convergence of ideologies and worldviews once considered distinct, if not mutually exclusive. For example, a recent study by Koch et al.³¹² of

online white supremacist activity illustrates how such actors have increasingly coopted and incorporated “jihadi language, motifs, and tactics into their ecosystem.”³¹³

[248] Social media have unquestionably been a great equaliser for providing radicalisation pathways to diverse communities of violent extremists. Even very new platforms, such as the Russian messaging platform TamTam (launched in 2017) have been equally used by Islamic State, IS affiliates, and multiple “neo-Nazis, accelerationists, and other violent extremist groups”.³¹⁴

[249] Encrypted messaging applications have added a layer of complexity, facilitating the exchange of violent extremist material by a broad spectrum of actors beyond the reach of mainstream social media censorship and government regulation.³¹⁵ Telegram has assisted extremist groups to avoid the deplatforming common to sites such as Facebook,³¹⁶ allowing both extremist influencers and disinformation alike to thrive.³¹⁷ However as Khalil notes, Telegram does not have a recommender system, meaning that extremists must share lists of extreme platforms.³¹⁸

[250] This has undermined traditional online CVE efforts including those challenging terrorist funding.³¹⁹ Whereas once such information was highly guarded, in an online world defined by anonymity and cryptocurrency, such efforts are increasingly out in the open. A report examining right-wing extremist sites in 2021 by Bogle from the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI) identified that Telegram ‘plays an important role in the online funding ecosystem... whilst not being a mechanism for raising money’.³²⁰ This included links to subscription platforms, cryptocurrency wallets, donation pages such as ‘Buy me a Coffee’, crowdfunding and payment gateways amongst others.

[251] Kenyon et al. note that the role of the Internet has become increasingly prominent for Islamist extremists in recent years, which they attribute to the glut of IS propaganda.³²¹ There is some disagreement between researchers³²² about trends associated with right-wing extremists – some researchers reported an *increase* in offline radicalisation in recent years, while others report the opposite. An answer, Kenyon and his colleagues note, may come from greater distinction between violent and nonviolent members – they noted a decline in postings by “those who became actively involved in extremist activities offline due to concerns their online activity may be monitored”.³²³

[252] Online extremist communities express support for violence conducted by individuals acting on behalf of that community.³²⁴ The 2018 Toronto van attack by Alek Minassian resulted in “overwhelming support among self-proclaimed incels for the attack and violence more generally”,³²⁵ demonstrating the potential of such attacks to inspire stochastic terrorism and further lone actor attacks. These issues raise questions about what there is to learn from comparing different types of supporters online. There certainly are distinctions evident in comparisons of violent and non-violent extremist groups within the same movements.

[253] Examining online indicators of extremism between violent and non-violent right-wing extremists, Scrivens found that in the *non-violent forums* there was greater evidence of “mobilization posts” – that is, messages seeking to recruit others to mobilise, or push them to some kind of action.³²⁶ Furthermore, Scrivens found that in general, non-violent right-wing extremists tended to be far “more active online than their violent counterparts in general.”³²⁷

[254] Early evidence suggests that posting to extreme right-wing and incel forums “increased significantly” during the pandemic, in marked contrast to “left-wing or jihadist forums”.³²⁸ The explanation for this trend, the authors suggest, “likely reflect the particular grievance-based and online nature of right-wing and incel extremism”.³²⁹

However, increased posting doesn't necessarily amount to increased threat of violence. The online behaviour of terrorists extends far beyond thinking, talking, or plotting to commit acts of violence.

[255] Though it is understandable why most research would focus on attempts to identify online behaviours that may signal attacks, violent extremists are also likely to participate in discussions about such issues as “dating, relationships, child rearing, politics, and other non-ideological concerns”.³³⁰ Holt et al. claim that these topics “often comprise the bulk of online forum discussions”.³³¹ Even within active extreme right internet forums, even racist or xenophobic content comprised only about 10% of posts.³³² Importantly, the researchers found that in those internet forums that were affiliated or associated with groups that engaged in real-world violence, those sites were “significantly more likely to contain ideological messages overall”.³³³

[256] There is very limited empirical research that analyses how *online* interactions and exposure to extremist content affect, or facilitate, violent extremist behaviour. If anything, the simple practice of spending time online is itself a risk factor for “greater exposure to extremist material”.³³⁴ A 2023 rapid review of the literature on online radicalisation concluded that there is ‘comparatively weak’ empirical evidence for online behaviour signatures that may be used to identify people at risk of violent extremism.³³⁵

[257] Different groups may use the same platform in different ways. Weimann and Pack found significant stylistic differences between jihadist channels and right-wing extremist channels on TamTam, notably: “jihadists employ TamTam channels as repositories of visual material, particularly video clips produced by ISIS. Video clips included propaganda videos such as “Flames of War,” gruesome footage of executions featuring beheadings, mass shootings, and burning of victims, training videos featuring children, youth, and foreign fighters, speeches of leaders such as Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and fighting scenes”.³³⁶ The right-wing posters on the other hand, used the platform mostly for “social interaction”.³³⁷ This deserves further exploration, especially as it might relate to how different social media platforms (as opposed to ideology per se) might be associated with greater risk of mobilisation to violence.

The Online/Offline Dichotomy

[258] It remains broadly accepted that most people who hold radical views will never mobilise to violence.³³⁸ Systematic evidence also now exists to support the argument that the internet plays “an increasingly prominent role in radicalisation”³³⁹ though “offline influences featured at least to some extent for most individuals”.³⁴⁰ Furthermore, there are detectable variations in online activities “depending on [the] pathway taken”,³⁴¹ and social media use has been one of the primary ways in which Internet use has changed in recent years.

[259] Kenyon et al.'s study of 235 convicted terrorists in the United Kingdom showed that approximately half (48%) were radicalised through a combination of both online and offline influences.³⁴² Those who were mostly radicalised offline comprised 40%, and those whose radicalisation could be said to be mostly online comprised 12% of the sample.³⁴³ When the researchers compared those extremist offenders who “primarily radicalised offline” with those offenders for whom the Internet was relevant in at least some way, “the only two statistically significant predictors were found to be whether individuals learnt from online sources and used open social media platforms. For those who learnt from online sources, the odds of either having primarily radicalised online or through both online and offline influences were 575 times greater than having primarily radicalised offline”.³⁴⁴

[260] The researchers also examined the role of ideology across the various pathway groups. They found that single issue terrorists for the most part had radicalised *offline*. Those offenders who were associated with right-wing extremism and who radicalised online, were characterised overall by steadily increasing reliance on online sources of information.³⁴⁵

[261] Offenders associated with Islamic extremism, on the other hand, also were characterised by increasing reliance on the Internet for exposure to radicalisation influences. Unsurprisingly, the significance of the Internet for the radicalisation of *younger* offenders was significantly more prominent than for older offenders. The researchers note in their conclusions that despite the evidence for an overall increase in the role of the Internet for shaping radicalisation pathways, the online domain is not “replacing the offline domain”, because “offline influences featured at least to some extent for most individuals within the sample”.³⁴⁶ The authors suggest further from a response perspective that “security services and counter-terrorism initiatives should continue targeting the Internet as a setting where extremist socialisation can occur, but not at the expense of paying attention to environmental interactions offline”.³⁴⁷

[262] This finding was further supported in the July 2023 rapid review of the literature conducted by researchers for the UK-based CREST Security Review. In that study, Mutton et al. reviewed evidence for online radicalisation in research and cases from the United States and Canada, Europe, and Israel between 2017 and 2022.³⁴⁸ They offered three key findings:

- 1) The ‘online-offline’ radicalisation dichotomy is unhelpful and potentially misleading. Radicalisation rarely takes place in just one or the other. Instead, it is today “characterised by complex and dynamic interactions between the two.”³⁴⁹
- 2) Research that attempted to characterise cases as either “online” or “offline” have likely “overestimated the extent to which the Internet contributes to radicalisation processes.”³⁵⁰
- 3) The Internet “in isolation does not cause radicalisation and is better understood as playing a role in facilitating this process.”³⁵¹

[263] Such findings are supported by a wide range of data and evidence, including (in other studies) by rare interviews with former violent extremists themselves about their own internet usage histories.³⁵² The CREST team reiterate earlier findings, however, that in cases of people who *primarily* radicalise online, they are more likely to be Islamic extremists.

[264] Such findings raise several implications for law enforcement and legal policy. However, one important caveat to the early identification of such content is a reminder that online content remains inexorably shaped by offline, real-world events. In a 2022 study by Thomas et al., the researchers examined how offline protests by Australian right-wing extremists influenced online interactions.³⁵³ Following the events of 2019 St. Kilda beach rally, online interactions between supporters of the rally and their opponents increased significantly. Researchers found that in their online activities, “both groups became angrier and used more “othering” language during the rally”.³⁵⁴ Of particular significance was what the researchers termed “mutual co-radicalisation”³⁵⁵ whereby the groups in question didn’t just interact with others “about their own worldviews – they are also seeking to interact with, inflame and/or denigrate people who hold the opposing position”.³⁵⁶

[265] Further research is required to better understand the intersection of the online and offline factors shaping participation and the propensity to act, but also that there are some emergent trends, though with limited research, in the behaviour of terrorists prior to conducting their attacks.

Summary

[266] A significant body of research (much non-specific to the pandemic era) demonstrates that terrorists not only spent significant time online, consuming and sharing extreme content, but also posted statements about their general views, grievances, ideological leanings, and even intent to commit acts of targeted violence. These are often expressed via “manifestos”, which range in size, quality, and originality.

[267] In addition to leaving real-world indicators of intent, attackers often leak elaborate public statements of intent, justification, and possible inspiration for others to emulate in advance of their acts.

[268] Whilst there exists empirical research that analyses how *online* interactions and exposure to extremist content affect, or facilitate, individual violent extremist behaviour, it is not understood how this works in a group context, particularly in the context of anti-government extremism.

[269] More research is required to understand the differences between online and offline radicalisation to violent extremism and the role of the internet in planning and conducting attacks.

[270] Research, in cooperation with policing and security agencies, is required to explore the processes at play between detection of online manifestos and the mobilisation of police to detect and react to the threat.

Emerging Trends in the Propagation of Violent Extremist Ideology

Introduction

[271] As Australia moves forward from the COVID-19 pandemic and response, it is important to understand the extent to which the pandemic has shaped the mechanisms through which violent extremists in Australia build their audiences and attract potential recruits.

Social Media as Creating Fertile Environments for Extreme Right and Religious Extremist Movements

[272] Extremists and violent extremists alike have sought to spread their narratives and to engage new followers through the often-sophisticated use of communication and social media technologies, particularly whilst large swathes of the population were restricted in their movement and locked down at home. A small, but rapidly growing body of academic literature has explored the use of platforms by populist political figures and anti-government campaigns, with some emphasis on the use of more traditional platforms including Twitter and Facebook by extreme right and conspiracy movements.

[273] In the past three years, there has been a considerable evolution in how violent extremists in Australia have sought to share their views or propaganda. In the context of the pandemic lockdowns, online spaces, in particular social media and encrypted messaging applications, are increasingly becoming important contributors to violent extremism and terrorism. They contribute to the building of transnational communities that amplify the messaging of the attacker and facilitate the exploitation of jurisdictional gaps between national, federal and state laws that impede the ability of governments to effectively respond.³⁵⁷

[274] One emergent theme in the literature is how social media sites serve as polarising spaces where different sides of a debate come into conflict, potentially creating a more fertile environment for extremists to both amplify their messaging and recruit. This is explored in relation to societal and political polarisation above at paragraphs [56] to [63].

[275] Whilst X/Twitter has been the primary area of focus for research on the extreme right online presence, there have also been studies of other platforms including Facebook, Gab and smaller platforms. Peucker et al. explored 50 Facebook and 40 Gab accounts between January and July 2020 to understand how they intersected with media reporting on the pandemic. They found that media posts, particularly from centre-right media outlets such as Sky News, are reframed by extremists on their social media pages to suit extreme right narrative messaging.³⁵⁸

[276] These findings were echoed in a study of extreme right and Salafi-jihadist narratives by Campion et al, which found that the political circumstances created by COVID-19 were integrated into their recruitment efforts,³⁵⁹ and, by Waldek et al. who found that right-wing extremists, antiestablishment and conspiratorial movements all exploited the pandemic to 'widen the Overton window' by spreading extremist narratives online.³⁶⁰ Nilan's monograph *Young People and the Far Right* identified that a combination of narratives espousing white victimhood, anti-feminist and homophobic propaganda combined with online anonymity, and were spread through a variety of tactics including memes, trolling, hacking, doxing and clickbait.³⁶¹

[277] As outlined above at paragraph [249], encrypted messaging apps like Telegram that are downloadable to both mobile phones and desktop computers have become a feature of extremist organisation in recent years, particularly as more established mainstream platforms have enacted at least some content measures of content moderation. Gill explored the chat history of five Australian conspiracist channels in 2021: QAnon, Project Phoenix, Wake Up Australia, the Australian Freedom Fighters and the Australian Peacemakers. Key themes identified across the channels included the concept of doing your own research, a corrupt society, the notion of COVID-19 as a conspiracy to extend state control and the concept of state persecution. These themes, along with a sense of victimhood, intersected with the narratives of extreme right actors, who would introduce their perspectives into the chats and seek to steer the conversation.

Social Media and Encrypted Messaging Platforms as Creating Fertile Environments for the Spread of Conspiracy Theories and Disinformation

[278] Beyond the socio-economic and demographic fault lines exacerbated by COVID-19 and the increase in polarisation explored in depth across this report, arguably the greatest impact of COVID-19 was the transnational spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories through social media. Some of this, including anti-vaccination and anti-science material, which spread to the wider community was potentially damaging to the public health response. However, from a P/CVE perspective, arguably more concerning has been the spread of conspiracy material that has been directly linked to acts of violent extremism whether in Australia or overseas, including QAnon, linked to many who participated in the January 06 Insurrection at the US Capitol Building; anti-5G sentiment, which has led to attacks on infrastructure both in Australia and overseas; and elements of the 'Freedom Movement', some of whom participated in attacks on police and media during protests and set fire to the Old Parliament House in Canberra.

[279] A number of Australian studies have explored the propagation of potentially violent conspiracy theories and misinformation on social media and encrypted messaging apps, finding that social media played a central role in exposure to and adoption of disinformation.³⁶²

[280] Examining the spread of conspiracy theories via almost 90,000 posts on Facebook in the early days of the pandemic (January – April 2020), Bruns et al. observed that conspiracy theorists “swiftly retrofitted the new information emerging about the virus... into their pre-existing worldviews, beliefs and ideologies...to promote their conspiracist narratives and prompt the further on-sharing of their counterfactual messages”.³⁶³ In particular, the authors noted, celebrity endorsements accelerated the spread of such narratives. In the only emergent literature about the role of TikTok in the spread of conspiracy theories, Van Poucke explored 254 videos posted over the period 01 January 2021 to 31 January 2022 to identify how users employed the semiotic resources (a platform that ‘thrives on the emotional response of its user population’) at their disposal to spread their viewpoints, aiming to elicit strong emotional responses, and in so doing attract them to similar material, creating ‘echo chambers’.³⁶⁴

[281] The TikTok social media platform has been influential in reaching young people, and particularly so during the pandemic. By mid 2020, it had attracted 1.5 billion active users, mostly children and teenagers.³⁶⁵ Featuring short, engaging video clips, the platform quickly became an ideal way for extreme right actors to spread their messaging to a potentially vulnerable new audience in an environment without adequate safeguards.³⁶⁶ In an analysis of TikTok content in July 2021, O’Connor identified that individuals and groups promoting extreme right ideologies utilised the technological affordances of the platform including profiles, hashtags, share functions, video effects and music to target people on the basis of protected attributes. At the extreme end messaging included glorification of extremism, advice to produce weapons, targeted harassment of minorities, and genocide denial.³⁶⁷

[282] The platform was ideal for the use of innovative approaches by extremists to target potential recruits, including humour. The ‘ambivalent playful culture’ of the platform combined with the ‘inherently ambivalent nature of humour’ made it difficult for content moderators, particularly those not trained or adept at spotting nuance, to differentiate between ‘humour punching up’, which can be socially beneficial, and ‘humour punching down’, which can be socially corrosive.³⁶⁸ Importantly, humour can be used as a protective mechanism. In New Zealand, it was identified that Māori and Pacific Island communities were particularly susceptible to misinformation about 5G towers and networks. Vodafone New Zealand commissioned Ngahere Communities, a Māori run creative agency to create short online videos targeted at social media that directly addressed conspiracies about 5G through a ‘myth busting’ and humorous approach. Shared by prominent influencers, these videos didn’t ridicule those impacted, but clearly and concisely explained the 5G network in a friendly, accessible and culturally relevant manner.³⁶⁹

Gaming Forums

[283] A number of international studies examining the intersection between gaming and violent extremism have been published in recent years. These studies have found that a combination of the technological affordances of gaming platforms, including the ability to talk to other players and the manipulation of emotions, including anger and humour, to build rapport and this therefore has implications for how violent extremists are sharing views and propaganda.³⁷⁰

[284] Scholars have looked at this in relation to recruitment efforts by extreme right actors. In a local context, scholars have noted that Christchurch terrorist Brenton Tarrant’s use of a head camera to livestream the attack closely resembled first-person gaming common in ‘shooter-verses-shooter narratives’, whilst his manifesto incorporated a number of internet and gaming memes.³⁷¹ This has since been replicated in other attacks including in Buffalo in the US, where the attack went viral despite almost immediate efforts to take the video down. This same local study reveals that gamers are often highly socially connected and that up to two-thirds of players watch recorded walkthroughs of gameplay, inclusive of that players’ commentary.

[285] The highly masculinised and misogynistic culture of gaming combined with trash talk and the deliberate use of provocative language and insults based on race, gender and sexual orientation serve as a segue into more organised activism. Other studies demonstrate that Jihadists have also sought to use specially created video games as recruiting mechanisms, though this predates the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁷² Both PISOIU and Lippe and Hartgers and Leidig argue for interventions including the incorporation of greater diversity during game development and support for gaming streamers who promote inclusive messaging.³⁷³

Algorithmic Radicalisation?

[286] Much has been written about the concept of algorithmic radicalisation. That is, the possibility that users are steered to similar content to which they search, driving further engagement with extremist content.³⁷⁴

[287] An exploratory Australian study by Reset Australia and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue titled ‘Algorithms as a Weapon Against Women’ sought to understand how algorithms might be driving young men toward manosphere content on YouTube.³⁷⁵ Notwithstanding its limited evidence base, the report makes some important preliminary findings, including that avatar accounts were recommending anti-feminist, manosphere, and Jordan Peterson content within hours of creation without any prompting from the researchers. The same study

demonstrated that when the researcher, using an avatar account, viewed, and liked recommended content on the YouTube platform, it led them from innocuous material to extreme right and male supremacist content within an hour. Within four days, recommended content included neo-Nazi and violent misogynist material, the majority of which was generated in the United States. The authors of the research recommended greater regulation of systems and processes beyond content moderation.

[288] Another Australian article exploring ‘algorithmic extremism’ on YouTube explored 800 political channels, finding that, to the contrary, YouTube’s recommendation algorithm ‘actively discourages viewers from visiting radicalising or extremist content’, placing the onus on the individual users search terms.³⁷⁶

[289] By contrast, a systematic review of 23 studies identified that 14 implicated the YouTube recommender system in facilitating access to problematic content, with seven producing mixed results and just two not implicating the system.³⁷⁷ There is a consensus in the literature that algorithms steer users of sites toward similar content to that which they have been searching, leading them down pathways to ever-increasing extreme content. Another ‘briefing paper’ study associated with the Institute for Strategic Dialogue explored the extent to which algorithms on other sites such as Amazon.com could play a role. It found that the recommendation feature algorithm resulted in the cross-propagation of conspiracy theories as potential purchasers were steered toward similar books, thus someone searching for information on vaccines could be steered toward a variety of books espousing COVID-19 conspiracy theories including QAnon content.³⁷⁸

Implications and Limitations of the Research

[290] The extreme right and religious extremists, including Salafi Jihadists and Christian fundamentalists alike appropriated narratives about the causes of COVID-19, reframing the events within their ideological and religious beliefs, spreading these ideas through social media.³⁷⁹ Studies from the United States demonstrate that strong links between Christian nationalism, anti-migrant and conspiracy theories exist,³⁸⁰ though there has not been a similar level of research in the Australian context.

[291] Another clear limitation is the lack of exploration in literature of face-to-face recruitment by extreme right and religious extremist groups. Access to these groups is difficult. In the context of university-based research with the inclusion of ethical considerations, it is often, almost, if not, impossible. University-based researchers often then limit themselves to what groups are saying rather than exploring pathways to, and patterns of, participation in violent extremist groups. Studies exploring these groups consequently, after a time, become repetitive and focused primarily on coding narratives. This does have the potential to offer insights into intervention points for policymakers but tells very little about how and why adherents are getting involved. Consequently, there is a considerable deficit in studies across the board of applied theoretical and in-person empirical depth. By exploring solely what extremist groups are saying or what they are doing online, there is a significant gap in knowledge about the core drivers to engagement in these groups and the importance of interpersonal relationships in spreading ideas and the process of radicalisation.

[292] Importantly, no current research explores, beyond online diffusion, how violent extremist messages are spread in rural Australia. Open-source reporting and anecdotal evidence demonstrates that regional Australia faces considerable challenges and that many attracted to extreme right movements and conspiracy theories, as well as new religious movements and cults, are located outside of rural cities and townships. Brenton Tarrant grew up in Griffith, New South Wales; and many conspiracy theorists and Sovereign Citizens live off grid in regional Australia. The Wieambilla attack occurred in ‘blockie’ country in rural Queensland and was carried out by middle aged,

educated Australians. There is a need to know more about the diffusion of extremist ideas in these contexts across socio-economic, age and education profiles and how they intersect with normative values in non-urban contexts.

Summary

[293] In the past three years, there has been a considerable evolution in how violent extremists in Australia have sought to share their views or propaganda. In the context of the pandemic lockdowns, online spaces, in particular social media and encrypted messaging applications are increasingly becoming important contributors to violent extremism and terrorism.

[294] Beyond the socio-economic and demographic fault lines exacerbated by COVID-19 and the increase in polarisation explored in depth across this report, arguably the greatest impact of COVID-19 was the transnational spread of disinformation and conspiracy theories through social media.

[295] New forms of social media such as TikTok, gaming forums and content sharing including YouTube offer a variety of new ways for the dissemination of information that is often beyond the capability of traditional content regulation to identify.

[296] Violent extremists have proved adept at exploring the technological affordances of social media and encrypted messaging applications to share their material and recruit amongst a segment of the population previously beyond their physical reach.

[297] Because of the use of technology, and as previously identified, new convergences are occurring in extremist ideologies, particularly in what they stand against. The dimensions of these new ideological convergences and their consequences for violent extremist tactics and target selection are not understood.

[298] Research has relied primarily on online material. There is a very limited literature in the face-to-face recruitment dynamics of violent extremist groups.

[299] There is also limited research available on the attraction individuals to violent extremism and the spread of violent extremism in regional and rural Australia. More work is required to understand these dynamics.

Discussion and Conclusion

Discussion

[300] This report has sought to inform the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs about new directions in radicalisation and violent extremism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has drawn upon a systematic literature review combined with expert insights to provide an evidence base that may inform decision making and has set out to answer nine questions relating to current developments in Countering Violent Extremism.

[301] Key gaps in the literature and recommended areas for further research have been identified. This conclusion revisits some key findings and places them in the context of contemporary challenges at the time of report release.

Increasing Polarisation and Fault Lines

[302] As the report indicates, the world leading up to 2020 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was already highly polarised and facing significant challenges. A resurgent extreme right was emboldened by global developments and far right populist leaders mainstreaming previously untenable ideas. Local developments including natural disasters created an environment in which trust in government was declining.

[303] For the majority, trust in government increased in the early stages of the pandemic, with governments enjoying support for public health measures. Similarly, strong government intervention and support programs also saw a decline in socio-economic inequality.

[304] However as public health driven lockdowns impacted those most vulnerable, and online misinformation and disinformation gained momentum, including conspiracy theories and anti-government attitudes, mass protest movements took to the streets.

[305] Whilst research on government messaging during the pandemic was limited (and is likely still being undertaken), there was a clear difference in the State of Victoria in how these protests were policed. A difference can be observed between 'progressive' protest with minimal policing and intervention, and anti-lockdown activists, anti-government 'freedom movement' actors including Sovereign Citizens, and extreme right actors - in which cases a heavily securitised police response was enacted.

[306] Socio-economic fault lines are grounded in the rapid increase in socio-economic inequality that has emerged from the pandemic including housing and cost of living crises. The division between those living in regional and rural Australia, and those in cities and suburbs has also been exacerbated. Those most impacted appear to have been experiencing a sense of relative deprivation and injustice, increasing their vulnerability to movements offering an alternate source of meaning and belonging.

[307] Sovereign Citizen movements are a key example of the impact of widening societal fault lines during the pandemic and its aftermath. Barely noticeable prior, Sovereign Citizens took centre stage at many 'freedom rally protests', and have since spread their influence nationally, particularly amongst older people in the outer suburbs and regions. With a strong track record overseas of violent extremism and increasing profile of such activity in Australia, it is unlikely that these movements will merely fade away. Their violent potential demands further scrutiny.

[308] Gender-based fault lines have historically been overlooked in relation to radicalisation, though a rapidly growing body of evidence suggests that men, particularly younger men who perceive themselves to be on downward or stagnating social trajectories are increasingly likely to be drawn to extremist narratives emphasising their victimhood and disempowerment. Extremist groups promote traditional gender roles and blame minorities and liberal elites for these men's challenging circumstances.

[309] At the personal level, families play a role in shaping the attraction of - or resistance to – extremist narratives. Isolation, loneliness and other mental and physical health challenges also contribute increased vulnerability for some.

[310] In the time between the completion of initial drafts of this report and its publication, a new, highly significant fault line, with both geostrategic and local implications, has opened in Western nations after the October 07 terrorist attack on Israel by Hamas and the subsequent war on Gaza.

[311] These events have elicited a truly global response across all the elements that this report discusses, though it is important to note that there is likely to be very little substantive, high quality and empirically grounded research conducted on the effects of this in the short time since hostilities commenced.

Online Ecosystems, Communities and Technologies

[312] Research demonstrates that one of the pandemic's major impacts in the radicalisation space was driving more people online who would subsequently be exposed to a 'witches brew' of conspiracy and extremist content spread by ideologically motivated actors seeking to benefit from the grievances and heightened emotion of the period.

[313] As individuals were spending longer at home and consequently had greater exposure to social media, they were not only drawing information from incredible sources, as they 'did their own research', but were actively being steered there by algorithms designed to increase engagement.

[314] As a consequence, the research suggests, we have seen younger and older cohorts of individuals drawn to extremist online material and narratives and already existing socio-economic, geographic and gender-based fault lines widen.

[315] The technological affordances of social media offered extremists the opportunity not only to identify and target potential recruits, but to calibrate their messaging. Social media was a key mechanism through which vulnerable individuals were pulled into an alternative online ecosystem defined by conspiratorial thinking, anti-government attitudes and in which extremist actors sought to normalise extremist sentiment.

[316] The online behaviour of terrorists prior to conducting their attacks has also necessitated further study in a rapidly evolving threat landscape. Studies demonstrate that the internet, including social media and encrypted messaging applications, plays a significant role in the sharing of violent extremist material, fundraising for extremist groups, sharing manifestos prior to attacks, and livestreaming those attacks. Violent extremist groups have sought to utilise video games and game forums to spread their message and recruit. The use of the first-person shooter videogames as a basis for the planning and conduct of terror acts, particularly by lone actors, is a clear-cut case of the online world influencing the offline.

[317] There is also a significant amount of non-recruitment activity that occurs in these spaces. From the manosphere, centred on discussions of perceived male victimhood and disempowerment, to extreme right forums centred on child rearing, and Salafi Jihadist forums centred on the minutiae of prayer timing, these online

communities operate parallel to the offline world, with their own rules and cultures that are not adequately understood but that can serve as a basis of mass mobilisation when local or international developments occur.

[318] Despite these significant developments (not to mention the possible use of Artificial Intelligence in recruitment efforts), there remains little empirical research on how online interactions and exposure to extremist content affect or facilitate violent extremist behaviour.

[319] These challenges are global in nature. Australia has experienced indigenised forms of extremist ideologies, grievances and tactics that have no historic parallel. However, other liberal democratic contexts are facing similar challenges due to the de-territorialised nature of contemporary extremism.

Best Practice Policy Approaches (so far)

[320] Due to the global dimension of these challenges, it is important that Australia understands best practices among likeminded countries in delivering P/CVE programs alongside social policy and law enforcement responses.

[321] Multiagency frameworks are employed across likeminded countries including Canada, the United Kingdom and in Europe. This approach facilitates calibrated responses based on local context.

[322] Blended approaches to engagement with radicalised young people, with a mix of online and offline strategies, have proven to be an effective component of engaging radicalised young people, as has engagement with family members prior to the entrenchment of extremist views. However, these are often initially difficult to identify.

[323] Canada stands out as an example of holistic best practice that works across government, academia, law enforcement and communities. European practice models prioritise tackling socio-economic inequalities whilst prioritising inclusivity and minority empowerment, though these appear to be premised on minority group radicalisation, overlooking challenges related to white extreme right radicalisation.

The Challenge of Imprisonment

[324] When these acts are identified and successful prosecutions are affected, policy makers and law enforcement face yet another challenge in determining how and where to house these offenders. Placing them with other like actors opens the possibility of consolidation of their extremist ideology, whilst housing them with non-terror offenders risks the radicalisation of others.

[325] Some research indicates that imprisonment can reduce radicalisation levels, and programs as the Proactive Integrated Support Model (PRISM) have created opportunities for self-reflection and equipping inmates with the tools to resist other inmates promoting extreme ideologies. However, these have been focussed primarily on Muslim prisoners and much work is required to understand its effect beyond this well-studied population.

[326] International studies of prisons similarly focus primarily on Muslim inmates and will increasingly be stretched in their applicability by new forms of extremism. A key finding for the Australian context is the need to equip prison guards with training on extremism and processes of radicalisation, to facilitate their addressing of the problem on the ground and developing local, context-based solutions.

The Rapidly Evolving Threat Landscape

[327] The assumptions of many best practice models will be challenged by more recent, contemporary developments emerging out of the pandemic.

[328] The pandemic accelerated already existent patterns of inequality and societal fault lines, resulting in expanded spectrum of violent extremist actors globally.

[329] Terrorists and violent extremists are paradoxically getting both younger, and older. Some men, who have traditionally benefited from societal structures favouring single income families and secure work increasingly view themselves as victims of a society empowering others at their expense, whilst extremism, historically associated with the cities, is increasingly prevalent in rural and regional Australia. Previously fringe conspiracy theories and extreme anti-government political perspectives abound. These are global trajectories playing out in unique ways in the Australian context.

[330] During the pandemic individuals spent more time online and conducted their own research, whilst at the same time extremists engaged more with one another online on a transnational basis. This has resulted in what Horgan terms 'Ideological Promiscuity', as ideologies shift and evolve rapidly based on local context.

[331] Furthermore, as emotions run high, grievances based on perceived individual and collective injustices are also fuelling acts of violence that often appear only loosely aligned with the notion of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause.

[332] Policy makers and law enforcement are arguably already unable to rely solely on traditional conceptualisations of 'community', as individuals may often have more in common with members of online communities than those in close proximity to them, be it family, ethnic or religious ties.

[333] This speaks also to the challenges of understanding the differences between on and offline radicalisation. Whilst a body of work was emerging looking beyond online recruitment prior to the pandemic, the lockdowns prevented this occurring in the same way and provided challenges for research. More work is required to understand these dynamics in the post pandemic environment.

[334] Another challenge to policy makers is identifying and preventing acts of lone actor terrorism inspired by other attacks. The importance of major attacks such as the Christchurch terror attack in inspiring further attacks, often by young men at a local level are only now being understood, as numerous attacks and plots are revealed and uncovered.

[335] Recent events have involved boys and young men wielding knives, adopting tactics similar to the Christchurch terrorist and Buffalo Shooter, and livestreaming attacks to ensure the spread of their message to as wide an audience as possible. These are likely demonstrative of a future trajectory for violent extremism and terrorism in Australia, as centralised organisations matter increasingly matter less, and individuals and small groups are taking centre stage.

[336] In a similar vein, pronouncements of support for prescribed terrorist organisations such as Hamas, which in the context of the Gaza conflict have become increasingly common amongst the left wing, suggest new directions with as yet unforeseeable consequences. Relatedly, the rise of antisemitism accompanying these events provides ample opportunities for the extreme right. Research on these developments is, at the time of writing likely to be in a nascent stage and beyond the scope of the review, though should be followed closely.

[337] The challenges facing the Australian Government's policy and decision makers in this space are historically unparalleled, combining increases in socio-economic inequalities, technological and associated social developments and rapidly evolving developments in the threat landscape.

[338] This review has indicated the current core areas of focus, and the limitations in current research, to the Australian Government, and in so doing contributes to the evidence base upon which Australian countering violent extremism policy is developed.

Conclusion: Areas for Future Research

[339] This report has revealed the emergence of a significant body of research exploring the evolution of violent extremism in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many Australian researchers have made important contributions to this rapidly growing body of work and continue to do so through existing research projects.

[340] Unsurprisingly, the bulk of this research is based on research in online environments where many of these developments have played out, and researchers have access to vast swathes of extremist content. This has its strengths, providing unique insights into how these movements have grown and disseminated extremist narratives so quickly and in a de-territorialised manner. It has revealed insights into their grievances, ideological orientations and those against whom they wish to enact violence.

[341] Research has been responsive to contemporary events and scholars have worked across the disciplines to gather evidence, publish and disseminate findings. Some of this research has been funded through grants from government research bodies and Federal and State government grants, whilst other research has been funded by PhD scholarships, small university grants or carried out with a minimum of funding and at the initiative of the individual researcher. Grey literature has often been made possible through non-governmental organisations and think tanks.

[342] The contemporary research base has, to varying extents, been successful in drawing attention to the scale of the challenges faced and their practical dimensions, demonstrating the capacity of university-based researchers to stretch tight budgets to achieve high quality research outcomes. This research has been influential in shaping government policies at the local, national and international level, demonstrating excellent value relative to research expenditure. It is also important to note that some of the most innovative and important research has been carried out by early career researchers, those who occupy the most precarious steps on the academic ladder and who benefit significantly from research funding grant opportunities.

[343] Noting the significant progress made, this review also identifies important limitations that are often only visible from undertaking an expansive review of literature.

[344] The research literature has been primarily focused on online developments. Whilst this is a critical dimension of contemporary violent extremism, it often bypasses the local, qualitative face to face and human dimension of violent extremist movements and their evolution. The technological affordances of social media and online interaction promote a level of performativity and polarised discourse often not present in face-to-face interaction. Research should aim to capture this. This review encourages researchers to recentre face to face empirical research to understand how violent extremist movements and actors grow and act offline.

[345] In a similar vein, the significant body of current empirical research also focuses primarily upon the manifestation of violent extremism in online environments and neglects key societal drivers. Put simply, it often

focusses on the symptom, rather than causes of radicalisation, and wider societal drivers or ‘push factors’. Such research provides insights into the narratives and ideas of specific groups and extremist actors, though these are increasingly becoming repetitive and often barely advance our knowledge beyond what we already know. A case in point relates to the rapid emergence of research scholarship on Involuntary Celibates (‘Incels’) that focuses on their misogynistic belief system, yet largely overlooks deeper structural questions about their emergence that could guide policy responses.

[346] There is also an often-unquestioning use of key concepts and vocabularies embedded in research scholarship that belie a deeper grounded theoretical approach to understanding new developments. This is often in part due to the need to fit the intellectual frame of journals and situate work within a field yet undermines intellectual progress that offers the potential for both incremental and paradigmatic change. There is significant room for greater theoretical depth and conceptual innovation in studies of violent extremism to provide deeper insights to assist in developing new questions and approaches that in turn generate a substantive evidence base to inform policy making.

[347] Research literature is also often fragmented. Whilst there are key journals and fields of inquiry such as terrorism studies, with several key journals, many more important contributions were sourced in disciplinary journals ranging across the social and health sciences. It became apparent in the conduct of this review that the academic silo effect is indeed significant and can see scholars, often from the same universities, undertaking research into the same phenomena, yet not proactively engaging with one another. This is perhaps a larger epistemological challenge beyond the scope of this review, though worth noting, if only to encourage researchers to build interdisciplinary teams.

[348] Notwithstanding these limitations, we are fortunate to be able to draw upon a comprehensive body of high-quality research. It is important to note the much of the research carried out during the pandemic will still be in process or in the publication stage, which can result in delays to sharing of new knowledge. It may be anticipated that research from this period will be published for many years beyond this review. This is one such limitation of any literature review on a contemporary phenomenon.

[349] The following recommendations are grounded in the important work that has been undertaken to date, and a synthesis of key limitations in research. The recommendations are interrelated. In addressing one, it is possible, and indeed, at times desirable, that researchers will engage substantively with elements of other recommendations.

[350] All recommendations encourage and indeed rely upon high quality empirical research. This is particularly the case for research in off-line environments. Further, theoretical and conceptual advancement and innovation should be grounded in engagement with primary source material and empirical data.

[351] The below synthesises the results of the literature review into eight key recommendations for future research:

- 1) Further inquiry is needed to better understand the underlying grievances shaping societal polarisation, the spread of disinformation, and attraction to anti-government and anti-democratic movements.
- 2) Greater exploration is required to understand the dynamics of offline radicalisation to violent extremism, including the role of friends, peers, and mentors in shaping ideological orientations, the passage of extremist narratives and recruitment, and effective policy intervention points.

- 3) Interdisciplinary investigation of the intersecting roles of socio-economic influences and key demographic factors including expanding age ranges, gender, and geographic factors increasing vulnerability to extremist messaging is critical to building an evidence base to inform coordination between CVE and wider government policy interventions.
- 4) Empirical research is needed to understand new forms of political, religious, and ideologically motivated violent extremism, their commonalities and differences, and how this challenge might be addressed by both CVE policy makers and within the judicial system.
- 5) More comprehensive research is required to enhance the conceptualisation of radicalisation, de-radicalisation, and disengagement in custodial contexts, and to explore international best practice models for addressing radicalisation in prisons in a local context.
- 6) Research is required to identify best practice lessons for government that can be drawn upon from overseas to inform professional development and support for intervention workers and other practitioners to address frontline challenges including rapid identification of imminent threats. Similarly, research is required to identify best practice legislative approaches to addressing new forms of violent extremism.
- 7) The role of the internet and social media in radicalisation and efforts by governments to address extremism with alternative narratives is increasingly well understood. Less so is how communities and individuals, without government support, organically challenge extremist narratives online and offline and the efficacy of these efforts. Empirical research is required to explore this in greater depth.
- 8) Research often involves the repetition of key concepts without critical engagement. Greater theoretical depth and conceptual innovation is required to address the constantly evolving dimension of violent extremism, and to ensure that relevant and timely questions are being asked. Research demonstrating theoretical depth and conceptual innovation should be prioritised.

[352] This report completes Phase 1 of the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs National Research Project, with Phase 2 to follow.

Appendices

1. Table 1. Search terms and string

C/VE search key	Boolean	COVID-related search key
TITLE-ABS-KEY (terrorism OR “violent extremis*” OR “political violence” OR “religious violence” OR radicali*ation OR “algorithmic radicali*ation” OR “right-wing extremis*” OR “right wing extremis*” OR “left-wing extremis*” OR “left wing extremis*” OR “Salafi Jihadis*” OR “men’s rights” OR incel OR CVE OR “white nationalis*” OR “white supremacis*” OR Nazi OR “neo-Nazi” OR Fascis* OR “Eco-Facism” OR “Eco Fascism” OR “Foreign Influence Operations” OR jihadi* OR “far-right” OR “far right” OR “alt right” OR “alt-right” OR manosphere OR fundamentalis* OR “Freedom Movement” OR “Freedom Rally” OR Truther OR 5G OR Wellness OR “Anti-Vaxx*” OR “Anti Vaxx*” OR “Alternative Health” OR Conspiracy OR “Q-Anon” OR “QAnon” OR “anti-democratic” OR “anti democratic” OR “Sovereign Citizen” OR premillennial OR textualist OR accelerationist OR “anti-gender” OR “anti gender” OR Tradwife OR “New Religious Movement” OR Conspiritual* OR Lightworker OR “white wellbeing” OR “white-wellbeing” OR Antifa OR Environment* OR “extinction rebellion” OR “Aussie farms” OR “farm transparency” OR Identitarian* OR Civili*ationis* OR “Tarrant” OR “Ustasha” OR “breadcrumb” OR “anti-trans” OR “lone wolf” OR “lone-wolf” OR assassinat* OR “fixated” OR sonnenrad OR “sun wheel” OR “system collapse” OR “Christian fascist” OR TikTok OR “WeChat” OR “filter bubble” OR “echo chamber” OR dox OR reddit OR telegram OR Sovcit OR apocalyp* OR “Al Qaeda” OR “Islamic State” OR grievance OR “red pill” OR “black pill” OR insurrection OR stormcels OR muslimcels OR masculine* OR “anti-feminism” OR “deep state” OR antisemitism OR “emerging threats” OR disinformation OR “domestic terrorism” OR “anti-government” OR Gab OR Instagram OR Rumble OR Twitter OR WhatsApp OR Manifesto OR “Red Flag” OR 4Chan OR 8Chan OR YouTube OR Facebook OR “misogynist violent extremism” OR misogyny OR “artificial intelligence” OR AI OR ChatGPT)	AND	TITLE-ABS-KEY (COVID* OR pandemic OR Coronavirus OR “Corona Virus” OR Quarantine OR Lockdown)
COVID-related search key	Boolean	Question-specific search key
TITLE-ABS-KEY (COVID* OR pandemic OR Coronavirus OR “Corona Virus” OR Quarantine OR Lockdown)	AND	TITLE-ABS-KEY (polari*ation OR “social cohesion” OR resilience) TITLE-ABS-KEY (drivers OR push OR pull OR marginali*ation OR grievance OR discrimination OR alienation OR disempowerment OR anger OR Grief OR youth OR “young people” OR adolescents OR teenagers OR teens OR tweens OR “young adults”) TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Government communication” OR “Public Health Messaging” OR “community engagement” OR Narratives OR protests OR marches OR “online messaging” OR “social media” OR telegram) TITLE-ABS-KEY (“fault Lines” OR “domestic unrest” OR “communal Violence” OR “economic inequality” OR unemployment OR “work from home” OR “social media” OR anger OR marginali*ation OR politics OR Populism OR Populist) TITLE-ABS-KEY (“Preventing Violent Extremism” OR PVE OR “Countering Violent Extremism” OR CVE OR Policy OR “Best Practice” OR “social policy” OR “law enforcement” OR policing OR “disaster management” OR “emergency services”) TITLE-ABS-KEY (Motivation OR Motive OR Reason OR Aim OR Religion OR Religious OR Politics OR Political OR Grievance) TITLE-ABS-KEY (Prison OR Imprisonment OR radicali*ation) TITLE-ABS-KEY (Online OR Indicators OR behaviour OR activity OR searches OR threats OR posts OR harassment OR abuse OR targeting) TITLE-ABS-KEY (Propaganda OR dissemination OR “social media” OR telegram OR twitter OR Parler OR Gab OR Reddit OR Rumble OR “Truth Social”)

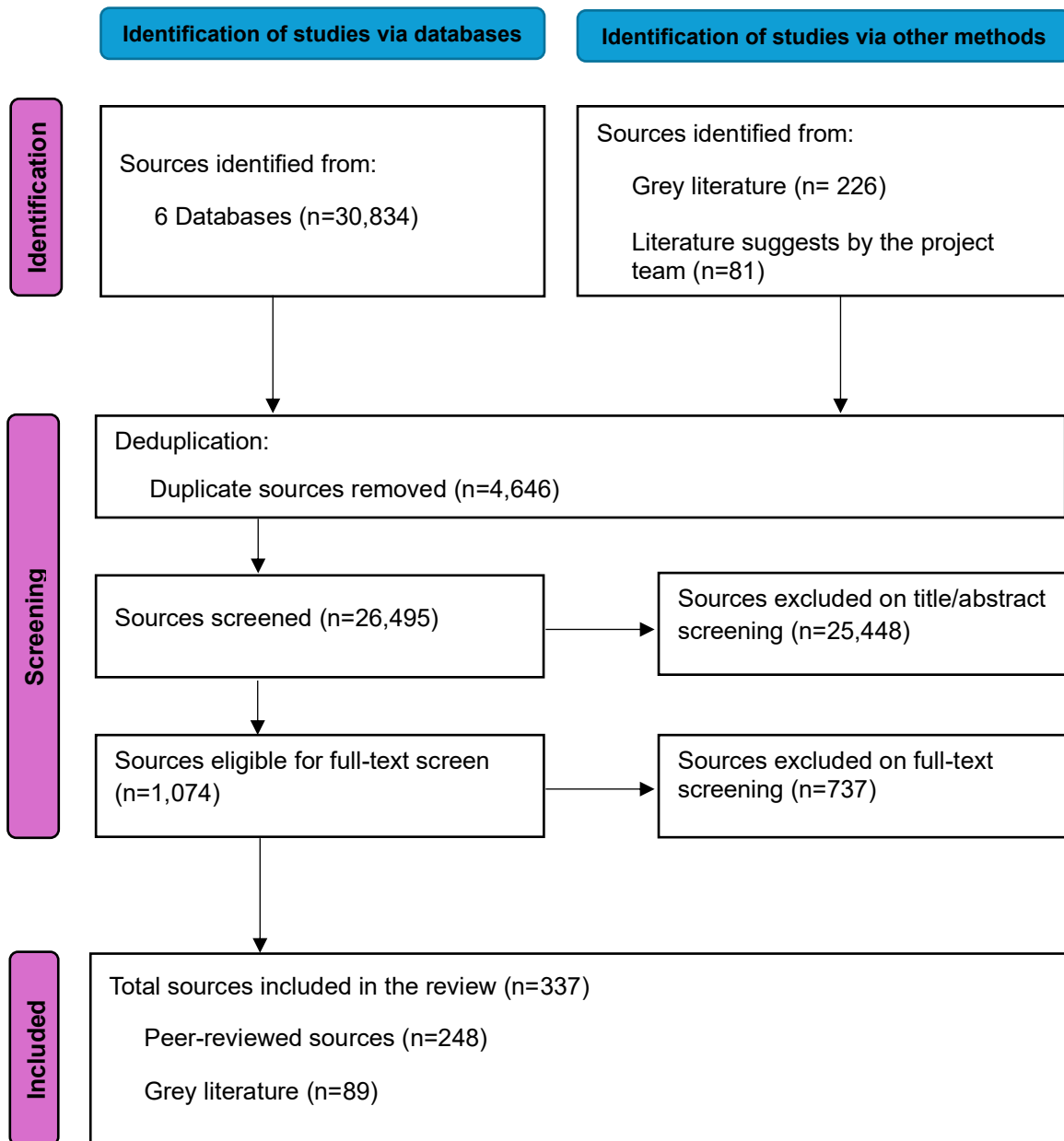
2. Table 2: Search Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion	Exclusion
Language: English	Non-English language sources
Published Date: Jan 2020-June 2023	Sources published prior to Jan 2020
Publication Type: Peer Reviewed research article; Disciplines: Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Psychology, and Health Sciences	Non-academic sources Disciplines other than Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities, Psychology, and Health Sciences
Geographical context: Western context (including Australia, New Zealand, the UK, Europe, and North America)	Geographical context: non-western context

3. Table 3: List of institutions and research centres consulted for relevant reports

Entities/institutions	Region
Hedayah	UAE
Moonshot	International
The Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)	Australia
The Lowy Institute	Australia
The Addressing Violent Extremism and Radicalisation to Terrorism (AVERT) Research Network	Australia
The Centre for Resilient and Inclusive Societies (CRIS)	Australia
Global Terrorism Index at The Institute for Economics & Peace (IEP)	Australia
The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) Germany	Europe
Counter-Terrorism Monitoring, Reporting and Support Mechanism (CT MORSE)	Europe
The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)	Europe
The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies	Europe
The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)	Europe
The Radicalization Awareness Network (RAN)	Europe
Women without Borders (WwB)	Europe
United Nations Security Council Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED)	International
The Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF)	International
The Global Center on Cooperative Security	International
The Conversation	International
The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)	International
The Organization for the Prevention of Violence (OPV)	North America
The Combating Terrorism Center (CTC) at West Point	North America
The RAND Corporation	North America
The Global Network on Extremism and Technology (GNET)	UK
The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)	UK
Radicalisation Research	UK
The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI)	UK
The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START)	UK

4. Figure 1. Flow diagram showing the systematic review process.



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